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# BATTLE OF WIZARDS

BY L. RON HUBBARD

**T**HE HUMANS WERE OUTNUMBERED AND THE COUNCIL was grave. No one had asked them here to this dark valley on the galaxy's rim. No one had pleaded for their arts. They had come and nothing short of miracles would let them stay.

The Mineralogy Service wanted Deltoid. Their chief had reported to the Galactic Council that Deltoid contained an almost unlimited supply of catalyst crystals in a natural state, a fact which would reduce the cost of freighter fuel manufacture by two-thirds. No one had argued with the need. The Galactic Council had sent for the navy and had told the navy to "safeguard" a mining expedition to Deltoid. The navy had refused. A shot fired in the presence of catalyst crystals would wipe out the planet and therefore the project.

An order, then, had wandered through dusty corridors to a small, forsaken office in the Military Defense Building of the capital to lie amongst fly-specked papers on a scratched desk. A bored chief of section had given it to Angus McBane and Angus had offered a few faint suggestions about overdue leave. But the leave was two standard years late anyway and Angus took the smudged sheet to supply. The office of Civil Affairs did not rate very high and what he got was third and fourth hand.

They loaded the *Argus 48* with five months supplies, put aboard thirty marines and eighteen sailors who had been found a disgrace to the service and gave the ship routine clearance.

Rusted and dented amid the fine, shining vessels of the important classifications, the *Argus 48* lay for twelve standard hours after release patching up a starboard port which had connected with a meteor and then fifteen more trying to get circulation into the jet cooling system. There was some raillery from the mechanics of the government base: the *Argus 48* was sailing under a CA and couldn't expect anything more.

Twenty-three days later they landed on Deltoid, in a valley indicated by the original survey, "high walled and impossible of land assault, sparse in game but containing the bulk of the beings that inhabit this system." The valley

was about a hundred and fifty leagues in diameter. They made their preliminary salutations and then Angus McBane came to council with the high chiefs of the realm.

Angus was a Civil Affairs officer. Nominally he was a colonial officer, but three years of special training and five more of service in CA had somehow removed him from the ordinary. He forgot to polish his buttons now. He had become gentle with years of dealing with less sentient races. He had spent a long time out beyond the last scout field and the life had changed him from the ordinary.

He clung to a stick as a symbol of a gentleman. But his *topee* was a disgrace and his tunic pockets bulged and he had found that mastodon hide boots were best.

He squatted down at the council, cross-legged, his black and gold stick across his knees, his bold Scot face sharply white in contrast to his uncut hair, his wise eyes bright in the firelight. Behind him knelt Dirk who had the largest mechanical sense and the least conscience of any non-com in the service.

The place smelled bad and the people smelled worse. They were humanoid and one would have thought them more than that until he looked at their feet and hands. Where there were claws, there should have been nails. And there was a deal too much hair on them. But they were sentient, oddly so, and their speech, filtered through the translating filter, was full of startling strength.

"You say you come to bring us blessings," said the ruling chief. "We have blessings. You say you can teach us many things. We know many things. You say you have much to give and you give nothing!"

The chief threw the trinkets into the fire, a magnifying glass and a chain of gold coins. Angus McBane showed no emotion about it. He looked at the men there, saw signs of disease and malnutrition, looked back at the chief.

"I can show you many ways to grow good food. I can cure a thousand sicknesses. I can prepare aids which will make your work less. I bring peace and plenty. Do not despise my gifts."

"You want this valley," said the chief, rearing up seven feet tall and glaring. "You want my people should enter your slavery. Your looking-over vessels came. This was not the first time we had seen your race. Five men of the looking-over vessel did not go back. We have no reason not to detain six."

"You must not talk like children," said Angus, aware that knives had shifted. "We want the rights to mine a rock on your planet. You may retain your own government. But I have many things to give. I can show you how to

raise food, good food, lots of food, food that is good to eat, I can build you ways to bring water into your villages. I can take away your sicknesses. I can do many powerful things for you and you will not have to pay."

The tribal chief expanded his chest and glared round him at his fellow councilmen. He read their mood.

"What power do you have that we do not have?" said the chief.

"It is a thing we call science," said Angus patiently. "With it we build such things as the ship in which we came. It will do many great things. It can make light appear in the night and it can keep beds dry when it rains. It can produce better children and it can make everyone wise. It can—"

"You say this *science* is powerful. Perhaps," said the chief, glowering, "you do not know that we also have a thing which is power."

"What is this thing?" said Angus.

A queer, clacking sound came and a sleek, fat fellow rose from beside the fire. He grinned with superiority and then, with a glance at the chief, waved his hand through the air.

Instantly a banner of light glowed there and then began to materialize into a form. Several near the fire scuttled back. Sergeant Dirk's rum-bleared eyes shot wide. A woman was taking form there, comely save for her claws. She floated upon the air and then abruptly dropped to the floor. She sat up, dazed, looked at the fire-painted faces, at Angus and hurriedly rushed from the council hut.

The sleek, fat youth sat down.

"Power," said the chief. "We have power. Is science greater than this magic?"

Angus McBane pushed at a live coal with his cane. He looked up after a little and there was a smile on his mouth. "Science is more powerful than this. It is more powerful than any magic. Its laws are greater laws than magic's laws. Science is more powerful than this."

Some seemed afraid of him then. But most of them were cued by the chief who was arrogant with disdain.

"If science is so great, I would know it. But nothing is greater than magic. I would like to see a thing greater than magic."

"I would be glad to show you," said Angus. He took out a pocket light and turned it on, lighting up the entire hut. But when he shut it off, the sleek youth waved his hand and the hut became twice as light.

The chief laughed. "Is there no more to your science?"

"There is much more," said Angus. "Science can do anything which this young man's magic can do."

There was a titter of disbelief. Sergeant Dirk moved back a pace, the better to wield a morning-star of his own manufacture in case the going got rough.

"Magic can drive people mad," said the chief.

"Science can make people sane," said Angus.

"In any contest with magic," suddenly announced the fat young man, grown very proud, "your science would lose."

Angus looked straight across the fire at the round, greasy face of the self-style magician. "If we were to engage in a contest, I should beat you."

The young man leaped up in triumph. "He has declared it. He has called the challenge and he is the challenger. Behold, I call you all to witness. These people would come upon us and rob and kill us but their science is not great. Here is one who challenges me! I accept the challenge!" He sat down promptly.

The chief smiled and his eyes glittered with a sporting thirst. "You have challenged, newcomer. It shall be arranged. When two warriors of our people disagree, they fight before all. You shall fight against our Taubo, he whom you have challenged. You have your rights. You shall fight."

Angus sighed but he nodded.

"You are aware of our rules?" said the chief.

"I am not," said Angus.

"Then I shall dictate the rules of this contest. Taubo shall have the morning in which to destroy you with his magic. You shall have the afternoon to destroy him with your science. Then so shall it be proved."

Sergeant Dirk tugged at Angus' shoulder. "Pull out, sir. It'll be poison and no chaser. 'Til—" He stopped at his boss' quick glance.

Angus thought for a while and poked a coal with the end of his cane. Then he looked at the chief and said, "I accept this 'contest'." He stood up and bowed to the young man. "I wish you every success," he said ironically and, turning on his heel, left the hut.

The word raced across the gigantic valley and for a week outlanders poured into the center, bringing with them scanty provisions but a voracious curiosity. They came, dragging children and weird animals, to aid in the erection of a brush amphitheater, to gossip all day and dance all night, and to gawp about the *Argus 48* and be kept at a distance by the marines.

The dust was thick, even within the ship, and Angus McBane wore a bandana across the lower part of his face

as he read. He had to lift the bandana to sip at a drink and he occasionally had to life his eyes from print to make some answer to Sergeant Dirk toiling in the room beyond.

Dirk had come into the marine corps under sentence never to be seen in civilian clothes again. He had left his right name behind but he had brought his ingenuity. Now and again some glimpse of his past would come up when a job needed to be done. But it was only a glimpse, like a curtain flicked back for an instant upon a long and gore-spattered corridor, and Angus never inquired.

Too tough even for the corps, Dirk had been shunted to Civil Affairs, that catch-all for odd men and odder jobs, and under Angus McBane he had managed to keep reasonably out of trouble. This was because he had found in his calloused and sin-choked heart, an affection for the officer. Time and again Angus had raked him out of drunk tanks and sent him back to duty without a tour in the infamous "dancing school" and Dirk, out of continually mounting gratitude, fondly supposed that he had shielded Angus from the facts of life.

When he lifted his eyes, Angus could see the jagged peaks which bounded the north of the valley and the rolling, dusty, scrub-covered lands which intervened. The place could be fertile, if these people could be coerced into the practices of agriculture. It was a wonder they had not discovered that their hunter society had begun to fail a century or two ago. They practiced infanticide and senicide to keep their population down to near food production level and yet they left untended better than ten thousand square miles of arable land. Such things irked Angus. Professionally, he was supposed to be indifferent to these things. But he was not. They distressed him.

"—so I says to this girl, 'Baby, if it's money that's worryin' you, take a look.' And then I found myself in a gutter with a headache and that's how I come to distrust wimmen," narrated Dirk. "The more sweet and beautiful they appear, the more I distrusts 'em. You got to be careful." He was busy with a small set of cogs which were entirely swallowed in his enormous hands. "Aw, you ain't listenin'."

"Sergeant," said Angus, "We can do a lot for these people."

Dirk looked out the port at the dusty land and the throng of gaping, multi-colored 'goonies'. He looked at his officer. "If you ast me, a dose of ray would cure 'em best. Sir, they got about as much heart as a Jack Ketch. They revels at the sight of blood and howls in glee at the



screams of the dead and dyin'. They're an outlandish and immoral lot of swine!"

"I am sure you are an authority on morals, sergeant. But the dose of ray you suggest would turn this place into a new nova."

"You kiddin'?"

"I am sure I am not," said Angus.

"Then you better not let Edwards run that guard by hisself. *He* aint got any sense."

"There isn't a loaded gun on board," said Angus. "And not one round."

Dirk looked through the port at the crowding, jostling humanoids. He looked at the dangling weapons, the filed teeth and the rolling eyes. He swallowed, coughed his chew of tobacco back up and spat in confusion. "That's why the scouts left their dead behind!"

"Right," said Angus. "Here comes the chief."

That dignitary was being carried on a litter of animal skins to the ship. His guards clubbed the crowd away, walked on a body or two and came to a halt at the air-lock.

The chief got all seven feet of him to the ground and entered the ship. He was not dismayed by the machinery. You couldn't hunt with it and so it was subject only to contempt.

"Taubo ready in the morning."

"That is a day early," said Angus.

"Taubo ready in the morning," said the chief.

They bowed. The chief got back on his litter and was carried away. The stricken lay where they had fallen, trodden down again by the curious.

"Civilize 'em!" said Dirk. "Give me twenty men and fixed bayonets and I'll civilize 'em. We won't be ready by morning!"

"We will," said Angus, putting the book aside. "Indeed we will."

The brush arena was jammed, presenting a wall of faces and a surge of odors which would have overpowered a lion. Three thousand humanoids had turned out this day to witness Taubo present a display of his powers and to howl over the downfall of the strange invaders. Deltoid had turned Mandrel's light above the rim and the far mountains were washed with pink. The dust had been settled by sprayings of water and pennons hung at either side of the arena.

Taubo came with his assistants. He was a wily young man, Taubo. He had succeeded his teacher and the former

head of his profession by a very effective dose of poison and his followers, knowing it well, served him with deference which, while it was not devotion, was at least efficient dignity.

The group toured the arena and then, in the center, Taubo leaped up, flung wide his arms and let loose a dreadful screech. It was a well practiced screech and it would nearly deafen at five feet. It started high and went higher and it had volume enough to satisfy the most savage. But it had more purpose than mere satisfaction. Many a victim had been paralyzed into complete obedience by that screech.

The crowd was instantly silent.

"I am Taubo!" cried the magician. "I come to show the invader of my power so that he will forever be afraid to come to us again from beyond the mountains. I am Taubo! I drink fresh blood and I dine on new-born children! One sight of my magic and the strongest sicken. One blast of my breath and men die. I am Taubo. My magic protects us from becoming slaves. *I shall conquer!*"

That was most satisfying to them all and, when they had recovered a little from fright, they cheered and cheered, beating wooden lances against hide shields and waving skins in the air.

But this had to end. They expected something very spectacular from the other pennon. A small knot of human beings had been gathered there since the first streaks of dawn. They had a raised curtain and from time to time one or another glanced into it.

Taubo became brave. He capered toward the humans, shouting for them to come forth and let him have his will of them, promising things which were truly blood-laking. Taubo ran back again to the seated chiefs.

"Make them come forth! They are cowards. Make them come! I will strike them where they are if they do not start!"

A chief raised a hand and a horn blew for silence.

"Come forth, invaders!" commanded the chief.

Three thousand pairs of humanoid eyes watched the curtain. It twitched. A form walked forth, calmly, certainly, carrying a chair and a book, and the crowd recognized the leader of the invaders.

The invader's cane was tucked under his arm and he seemed to be neither impressed nor hurried. He put the chair down in the exact center of the arena and sat upon it. He put the cane across his knees and he opened a book. And then calmly, very calmly, he began to scan the pages with a quiet eye.

Taubo leaped forward. He paused only long enough to wave his arms in salute to the crowd and then he went to work. Coming to within a foot of the invader's ear he let loose a screech which rocked the first rows. It was long, loud and deafening.

The quiet eyes continued to scan the pages.

Taubo let go a howl of disappointment which was not part of his program. He backed up. Then he reached a hand toward a follower and took a wand.

Two of his people began to beat upon a drum and the shocks of it were physical. Close up they were enough to stop a heart, properly directed. Taubo waved the wand. A curtain of fire began to play about the invader's head.

After a few minutes of this, a woman and an old man in the near rows fell out of their seats, insensible.

The drumming continued, grew louder, the whole force of it solidly directed at the breast of the quiet reader. The lightning played and crackled, set fire to a tunic of one of Taubo's followers and had to be put out.

For half an hour the beating continued.

The invader turned pages calmly.

"You Angush!" screamed Taubo. "You wait. I fix you!"

Taubo was becoming angry. He pulled forth an incense pot and he put some coals into it from a fire near his penon. His followers knew now not to get downwind of that pot. One whiff and a man would die. Taubo dropped some powder into it and blue flames and dense clouds began to roll, clouds which Taubo avoided.

The engulfing smoke bore down upon the seated invader, swallowed him up from sight, drifted across the field and abruptly and with agony killed a wandering dog. It reached the arena edge and a man leaped up and clawed, his throat bleeding. The area of the smoke was hastily cleared.

The charge in the pot sputtered out. Taubo stared.

Another page was being turned!

After a frenzy of rage in which he beat two followers, Taubo came back to his business at hand. He made a number of incantations, driving them home with flashes of light from his wand. He did not expect these would have any effect but they were good showmanship. Then he trotted back and gingerly scooped up a small spade of grey powder. He carefully touched none of it. It was culled from a certain bush and when distilled, a pinch of it on the skin caused an exquisite and rapid dying.

Taubo capered, careful of the powder, and made further loud incantations, interspersed with numerous shrieks and wailings which were orders to the demons of the place to do their worst.

He dashed in suddenly, tipped the spade and showered a cascade of violent poison over his enemy.

Gleeful now, Taubo capered back, expecting an instantaneous effect, since the power had touched the face and the hands.

The invader tipped the book to clear the print, put the volume back on his knees, and went on reading!

The crowd was becoming a little restless. The sun was rather high now and they had not come to see a magician dance but an invader die. Then, that imperturbable figure was beginning to wear upon them almost as much as it did on Taubo. They had seen magic operate before!

Taubo withdrew. For a long time he took advices with his followers and finally decided upon the final trick.

He had planted, that morning, a number of very tindery bushes underneath the sand and he had saturated them with an oil which burned furiously. He had not thought he would have to use this trick, but the time was at hand.

Taubo marched forth with a loud beating of drums and delivered a wailing chant which again captured his audience. He capered about the reading invader and raced to the points of a star he was drawing on the ground with a wand.

When he had finished a long show of this, he gave an imperceptible signal to a follower and suddenly pointed his wand at a point of the star.

Flame burst.

To the crowd it appeared as though the ground itself was on fire. The smoke rolled and the flames rose pale yellow and smoking in the daylight. At the exact center of the star sat the reader of books.

The fire swept forward, leaped higher. It came to the invader's toes. The drums rolled a heavy, rising storm. The flames went under the invader's feet! Then the smoke was thick and the crowd could not see. But the chair was charring. The entire star was burning in the sand. It was obvious that nothing human could live in that 'magic' fire!

Slowly the spent flames died down. The smoke blew aside. Taubo stared.

The invader turned another page!

The entire arena came to its feet with a moan. Taubo started forward. He was becoming red in the face. He had his wand lifted to strike and the shaking tension within tore at him. He moved another step forward, wand still raised. And then he fell, headlong, dead.

If those three thousand humanoids could have moved they would have done so. They could not. From terror they stood as though tied.

The invader glanced up at the sun, saw that it was overhead and rose from the chair. Finger keeping his place he walked straight toward the pennons which marked his side. He passed into the curtain and out of sight.

The crowd, chiefs and all, would have run away if Angus had not instantly come out. He marched straight to the bank of notables.

His hair was wet with sweat, his face was black with grime. He stopped and looked at the chiefs.

"You have seen how impervious science is to magic," he said. "I ask you to concede that I have won and that all my demands must therefore be fulfilled. I shall not kill you. I shall help you for science does not kill, it saves. Do you acknowledge my sovereignty on this planet in the name of the Galactic Council and the Civil Affairs Branch of the Military Defense?"

They took in his words. They realized that he was not that instant going to kill them. And then they looked at the body of Taubo and sensed somehow that they were free of a thing they could not describe.

They looked at Angus McBane with his lank black hair and his soiled tunic and his cane and suddenly, as the chiefs rose to assent, the humanoids began to cheer. They cheered louder and louder and babies cried and dogs barked and sound rose in an enthusiasm which was loud enough to be physical force.

"You hear the people," said the high chief. "I hear the people. We acknowledge your science and assent to your rule. You are our lord and your person is sacred unto us forever more."

Angus bowed and walked back through the swelling din to the curtains and the enclosure.

. . .

That evening Angus McBane, Civil Affairs, sent off a laconic dispatch to his superiors.

**"DELTOIDS WILL NOT OBJECT TO MINING  
OPERATIONS. EQUIPMENT MAY BE SENT  
AT ANY TIME. McBANE."**

In the machine shop, meanwhile, of the *Argus 48* Sergeant Dirk finished his careful neutralizing, according to McBane's directions, of the robot McBane had designed and he had built. It was not a very good likeness of McBane anyway and besides they needed the parts. McBane regretted the destruction of one perfectly good book.

# THE ALBINO CANARY

BY HAL MOORE

Who will be next, I wonder. Perhaps the Parson's nosey wife. Yes, she is the most likely. She never bothers to knock, just walks right in. She will be puzzled at first, of course. I imagine I can hear her calling now. "Marie . . . Marie . . . Are you home, Dear?" But no answer. Only a seemingly feeble peep from the canary—the strange albino canary. Then she will find me left all alone, with no food, no water. She will get close to me. Close. And then—

I still don't know whether I should hate that vicious cat—or love him. (Does an eater of Hashish hate or love his first taste of the drug?) And the cat *was* vicious. And cunning. Now I am vicious, I suppose, for I am cunning. And Tom—what an unimaginative name for that devil-cat—Tom is no more.

Oh, he almost got me. Almost. He would have too, had I been an ordinary canary. But then I am not ordinary. "Strange." That is the word always used describing me. I have always been "strange."

I was the only one to hatch of the three eggs my mother last tended. And I was no sooner out of my shell and breathing the air of the world than I knew I was dying. Immediately I was stricken with fear and concurrently, an overwhelming desire to live. Tiny, naked little creature I was, so delicate, so fragile, my only instinct should have been to huddle in my mother's warmth. But somewhere from out of the black spawning-grounds of Hell had come to me a soul. Yes, a black soul and with that a spark of intelligence and—a strange and terrible power.

My memories are now hazed over with many other memories and it is difficult for me to cast back into the mind that was once mine. Yet, it is not all lost, that consciousness I first knew. That consciousness first of being alive—and dying. But I did not die because I would *not* die. The power within me reached out and around me and as I huddled beneath my mother's breast drained her of her strength and her will to live. Yes, I lived and she died. Placed in an incubator I lived to grow strong—and terrible.

An albino I was. The first albino canary ever known. "Unheard of!" "Strange!" But I lived, a strange albino canary. And

one day I was purchased by a glowering man, saturnine of countenance, crass of nature. He laughed when he saw me. "The Devil's own canary!" he roared. And he laughed and took me home with him.

Tom almost got me. Cunning cat. He leaped to a table, crouched just under my cage, yellow eyes gleaming in the warm afternoon sunlight. I was terrified. I shrieked piercingly. But no one heard me, because the baby was prattling so loudly as he played on the floor. That damned baby.

Tom sprang. He embraced my cage, claws gripping the wires, clinging mightily while the cage swung up and down and around, like a cork on a string. And I screamed and the baby prattled on Tom unlatched the door with one paw, reached in after me. Cunning cat. Fear coursed like fire in my veins. Certain I was death was inescapable this time in the form of Tom's clutching claws. But I had a will to live and I had fought death before.

Something stirred within me. Some great surge of power motivated by burning fear and an invincible will to live. A power nurtured as I drained my mother of her life that I might live. Power. Evil, omnipotent power brought to the fore by threat of imminent disaster. Something expanded from within me. A grey mist spread outward around my body and reached toward Tom. Razor talons were raking my feathers when the *aura* touched him.

The *aura* touched Tom's paw. Just a little grey mist, it seemed, but Tom screamed. A wail of terror. Of indescribable terror of an animal whose atavistic memories of fear cast back thousands of years into steaming jungles and Hell-corners the earth around. The baby even stopped its inane gibberish. Tom screamed. Lament of a soul rent asunder. The *aura* spread more swiftly now. Now Tom was enveloped in the mist. He began to shrivel, to fade. In a minute, no more, he was gone. The *aura* absorbed him down to the last claw—and the last memory.

Then the mist returned whence it came. Into my body. And my terror was gone and I felt a new strength—and a new cunning. That which was once Tom, was now a part of me!

The baby's mother came running into the room. She looked wildly about for the origin of the screams she had no doubt heard from another room. But there was only the baby on the floor, yowling now like a caliope in warm-up. And there was I singing in my cage. The woman picked the baby from the floor and took him into another room to quiet him.

All that day my songs were especially exuberant and of infinite variety spawned from my new strength. Strength and memories. Ah, Tom's memories have enhanced the variety of my songs. Songs now of nights I had never dreamed of before. Songs of backyard fences and of a sleek tortoise-shell female—

The next day the thrill of the new experience had worn thin. Most of the night I had stayed awake searching among Tom's memories. I was tired and I had an emotional hangover. The baby as usual sat on the floor, played with his toys and prattled ceaselessly. He kept me awake for hours with his confounded blither! Finally I could stand it no longer.

Something of the cruel, vicious Tom came to the fore. Of course, I thought, why didn't I think of that myself? I unlatched the cage door with one foot. Oh, that was easy. Any canary could do it—if he had the intelligence. And I had Tom's intelligence to guide me.

I opened the door and flew out of the cage. For a few minutes I circled around the room enjoying my new freedom. The temptation was to fly out of the open window. But I realized if I did that I would have to forage for my own food. It was good to sit and sing all day and have humans feed you and look after you. Then I remembered the purpose of my escape. The baby.

The instant I remembered the baby his shrill gurglings began to tear at my nerves again. It was maddening. Yes, what I was going to do would relieve me for evermore of that torture. I swooped down close to the infant, lighted on the floor near him. His chubby little hands reached out towards me. I could imagine how I would fare in the clutch of those pink fingers. I would meet the fate of the rubber duck whose neck was wrung a hundred times a day.

Yes, it was a build-up. I had to be in the proper mood. And it worked well. Soon the *aura* began to emanate from my body. The baby was not frightened. It did not know enough yet to fear. The *aura* swept out and closed around the infant. Just a matter of a minute. The pink flesh turned grey, the tiny body grew even smaller—it seemed to evaporate—and soon there was no more. The *aura* returned within my body. With it the strength of the child and its few distorted memories. I returned to my cage, carefully latched the door behind me and sank into a heavy, drugged slumber.

I awoke to the callings of the mother. Night had fallen in the few short hours I had slept. The mother, rather a careless and a sloppy woman all in all, had just missed the baby. She came into the room looking for it. Not there. Not in the bedroom. Not anywhere in the house. Not outside. Not anywhere.

I will spare you the hysterics that ensued. Police and talk of kidnaping. The mother and father pacing about the house in anxiety and fear. And I singing merrily in my cage.

"That damned canary!" the father shouted. "Shut him up!" But I only sang the louder. And I noticed a curious thing. My feathers were not as white as they usually were. Gone was the snowy brilliance that had attracted the strange, dark, brooding



man of the house to me. I was still white, but there was an odd tinge of yellow now. I sang and sang, far into the night.

The next day I awoke with a terrible whirling in my head and a great hunger. How can I describe that hunger. It was as of an emptiness in my soul. It was a consuming hunger, as if I were devouring my own body as the minutes passed. I tried to eat birdseed, but that was useless; I nearly choked on them.

Then the wife came into the room. A small dark haired woman. Flabby faced and sloppy and now red-eyed from crying the whole of the night. Ah, this was the answer! I would devour her! Of course. I had acquired a taste for flesh and for souls. Maybe hers would stop the terrible hunger gnawing within me.

It did. It was too easy. She reached her hand into the cage to feed me more seed and the *aura* spread out and clutched her. She was too stupid even to scream. It was all over in a minute. The grey mist spread out and enveloped her. There was one terrified gasp and that was all. Soon she was a part of me.

And then the terrible hunger went away. I felt replete, at ease with the world. I burst into song again, the fury of which astounded even me. The woman. What passions had lurked under her plain and frowsy brow! She and the dark, brooding master of the house. To what heights and depths of emotion they had soared and sunk! I sang until nightfall and then fell exhausted into deep slumber.

"Marie! Marie! Where are you?" The master's voice awakened me. The man lurched into the room, rubbing sleep from his eyes and calling for his wife. The memories of the woman told me that he had probably been drunk all night and was just now waking from a stupor, to find her gone.

He blundered through the house calling and cursing. And I, awakened so rudely, began to prune my feathers. Then I noticed it again. My feathers were even less white than before. In fact there was a distinct yellowish tinge. Strange, I thought, most strange. And then the hunger came again.

This time there was no doubt in my mind about what I hungered for. A soul. A body and a soul, that is what I hungered for. And there was one more in the house. One more.

The man lumbered into the room, still searching for Marie. He found her all right. But not in the manner he expected. I knew what I had to do. I had opened the door and it was swinging on its hinges. The dark man clumped to a halt near my cage. He turned bloodshot eyes upon me. And there was fear in the look. I swear he almost knew what had happened. There was fear in the look and he swore at me, violently, horribly and he lurched toward my cage, hands outstretched. He was going to crush me in his hairy hands. Somehow he suspected that I was responsible.

I flew out of the cage at the man. I fastened my tiny feet to

his collar and hung on tight; hung on like death. The man reeled back against the wall. His great hands sought for me. He screamed one long hoarse moan of terror. And then the *aura* did its work. The man melted into nothingness and became a part of me.

I returned to my cage—the only home I had ever known—and surrendered myself to the ecstasy of absorbing his soul into my own. And I sang and sang. Weird, dark melodies like those no canary ever knew before. Memories of a dark mind set to music. And I reeled and swam in a haze of drug-like joy. When evening came I fell to the bottom of the cage into slumber of the drugged.

And now it is morning. My feathers are bright-yellow now. There is no more outward manifestation of my unusual talents. I look just like any other canary. Oh, I think I have it figured to perfection. I will await the next victim. Probably the Parson's wife. She is due for a visit. She will feel sorry for me, try to feed me. And she shall feed me. Not with birdseed, but with her soul!

Then out into the world. The great wide world as I know it from Tom and from the woman and from the dark man. There I shall live! There will be food aplenty. Countless human bodies and souls to feed upon. It will be so easy. I will look to be just a harmless little canary. I might even find myself another cage in a home somewhere, for a short visit—and a feast!

But listen! I heard the door open and no one knocked.

"Marie . . . Marie . . . Are you home, Dear?"

She is coming nearer. She will soon be in this room and she will see me. I have tipped over the water just now and the seed. The door is opening . . .

"Oh . . . No one home. Oh, why you poor little canary! No one home and no water or seed! Let me feed you . . ."

## "DIFFERENT"

### THE VOICE OF THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

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# TIMELESS

BY EDELL FORD

Foster left the office early that evening, for what reason he did not know. Maybe he had a headache. It wasn't exactly that, he knew, but he had a strange feeling that he could not have explained to anyone if he had felt so obliged, but he had no intentions of trying to explain it, so he simply told Ellen he was going home a few minutes early.

"Goodnight, Mr. Foster," his secretary said pleasantly enough. Nothing unusual about that. She always said the same thing in the same way.

The girl in the outer office bade him goodnight, too, the way she always did. And the cute redhead at the switchboard caught his eye and winked, same as always.

Foster went out into the sunlit street, with his briefcase under his right arm. It was early yet; he would get a cup of coffee and then walk home instead of catching the bus. Maybe pick up some flowers for his wife; she would like that. He didn't do it often enough, but it was strange he should think of that now.

He stopped in at Joe's Place down the street from the office. They had swell coffee there, and great big doughnuts with little holes. Joe's was one big blurb of color and odor and sound. Foster liked it there; it was homey and always took away a fellow's blues. Everybody stopped there—bums, business men, and billionaires.

A wave of heavy delicious smells and the throbbings of a juke-box struck him in the face as he stepped into the restaurant. Joe hailed him from his seat by the busy cash register.

"Foster! how's my boy?" came the jovial, too-loud greeting from the red-faced proprietor.

Foster forced a smile and a return greeting. Threw himself onto a stool at the counter and waited for the accustomed order. He looked around to see if there was anybody present that he knew. All the people eating there seemed to be strangers. Their faces were like masks, their eyes strange and afraid above their food. The waitresses, ordinarily witty and friendly, moved among the tables like robots, the expressions on their faces painted and conveying no thought at all. Only Joe was gay and unconcerned, but it seemed to Foster that all his jokes fell

short of his usual joviality. No one laughed at the corny, and sometimes smutty, remarks that he made.

Foster pushed a quarter across the counter toward Joe's red, waiting hand and got out. Behind him the juke-box was crying for a nickel, and somebody kicked it. A moment later it started squalling the St. Louis Blues again.

Something was wrong. Foster knew it, but it was something intangible, he couldn't put his finger on it. He hurried down the street, looking into the shops as he passed them. People were going about their usual duties and activities, never knowing, unconcerned . . . but there was an uncanny look on every face. The barbers bending over their customers had a strange gleam in their eyes, yet they were carrying on conversation just as they always did while working. The shopkeepers were selling their wares, but they did not smile as they gave out with the usual sales talk. The clerks, the business men, the idle workers, all seemed to look at Foster as he passed, yet they were all looking far out past him with gazes impersonal but penetrating, looking into—what? Only Foster knew, and yet he didn't know at all . . .

He decided he didn't feel so well; he would catch the bus for home after all. Hitching his briefcase further up under his arm, he stopped on the next corner to wait. He waited alone, for no one else came to board the next bus. And he waited, but the bus did not come. He might have hailed a friend, but no one passed, not even a stranger. The street was suddenly empty, like a glass drained of its contents. The sun seemed motionless, and the hands of the great clock in front of the bank behind him stood still. Their chimes no longer intoned the quarter-hour, the half-hour, and the hour. Several times Foster decided to walk home, but he never found himself starting. Somehow his mind and muscles were paralyzed with a hazy, inexplicable kind of dream-world veil that spread over his entire being.

Suddenly he knew the cause of this strange feeling, and he was petrified by the thought. *Time was standing still!* The incredible had occurred! Not even the sun was functioning, and all that was artificial and man-made had come up against the supreme test and had failed! Would the moon rise? he wondered, and would dawn find him standing on the corner, waiting for a bus that would never arrive? Was life suspended indefinitely upon a mere thread of time?

Foster began to despair. What did people do in such cases as this? How to shake off this plague of a time-warp, or arrested dimension, or whatever it was? Just at the crucial moment when he was about to crack under the strain, Foster remembered that his mind was not completely useless, and that if he could send out a mental projection and possibly contact another mind—he

decided it would be worth trying. Clearing his mind of all confusing mental fragments, he projected onto the clouded screen of his consciousness these words: WE ARE BROTHERS.

He waited, probing into the darkness and straining his mind to receive an answer that would assure him that he was not alone in this obsession, as a drowning man grasps for a wave that will lift him up. Finally he received a message, but it offered little help to him in his uncanny plight. The words he picked up were: TIME AND SPACE.

Despair engulfed Foster again. The message had no meaning to him, none at all. He muttered over and over, "Time and space. Time and space. We are brothers—" A light broke through the gloom of his consciousness as he realized that time and space *are* brothers. But what did that have to do with him? Then he knew. Because of the worry of his work and the burdens of life, he had deliberately forced himself out of the time and space of the ordinary mind. The three of them were brothers!

And as this thought came to him, Foster felt a great burden lift from his soul. Suddenly he found himself walking. He passed the shops where some time before—how long, he knew not—the empty faces of the populace had stared through him into space. They were all as before, piercing eyes that saw nothing, not even the lone mortal walking along the street outside their shops. Every minute detail of existence was still caught up in the hand of the Great Tinker, He Who controlled time and all its tangents. Nothing and no one except Foster had been loosed from the spell, for he knew that only himself, and not these people, had been affected.

The hands of the clock in front of the bank showed that the time was five o'clock. Foster walked more hurriedly. Beyond the bank was his office, and it was late. Or was it early? He could not tell.

A hazy film left his mind as he walked through the familiar door of Foster Supplies, Incorporated. The redhead was still at the switchboard, and she winked at him. The girl in the outer office said, "Hello, Mr. Foster", quite pleasantly; and Ellen, who had just come out from the other room, said, "Oh, hello, Mr. Foster. Did you forget something?"

Foster grinned and said, "Why yes, I did. But I'll take care of it. You go on home, Ellen; it's too early for me." He disappeared briskly into the inner office. Once inside he opened the blinds of the window and looked down onto the street below. A pleasant hum of traffic rose to his ears, and he noticed that his bus had just pulled out from the curb.

# Songs of the Spaceways

POETRY EDITOR: LILLITH LORRAINE, ROGERS, ARK.

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## RETURN OF THE HERO

He stood before them in the lecture hall,  
The man who had returned last night from Mars,  
His mind still dazed with his ordeal of stars.  
He saw their faces white with shock and fear;  
He gripped the lectern, strained his ears to hear  
One single word of triumph or delight,  
None came. A fungoid stillness spread  
Over the audience, the very air seemed dead.  
"My friends," he said "I bring you wonder."  
And in his voice was muted thunder.  
"People of earth, I bring you wild surprise."  
And there were gleams of lightning in his eyes.  
"I come to tell you I have seen a race so fair  
That in your sheerest dreams you scarcely dare  
To think that men can be as they."  
He stopped—a strange unease grew in the hall,  
He saw embarrassment, and then a small  
Slow flicker of disdain ran through the crowd;  
No one should speak such words as that out loud  
It seemed to say. He took one step toward them,  
"Listen," he said "We have it in our power  
To learn of them, and see the whole world flower  
In beauty, and all nations live in peace,  
Fear and want banished and injustice cease."  
Out in the audience he heard a voice,  
"Pardon me, Mister, are there any choice  
Lands to be grabbed or profits to be made?"  
The man on the stage was suddenly afraid.  
He who had dared the awful cold of space,  
Afraid of what he saw upon that face.  
Swiftly he turned and in no time at all  
His car was speeding from the lecture hall.  
Next day this scoop was in the MORNING SUN:  
FLYER STEALS SPACE SHIP AT THE  
POINT OF GUN.

*Evelyn Thorne*

## THE EVIL STAR

Within the palace plane the guide was saying,  
"This is the earth, the last outpost of force.  
Feel how her hate waves keep our space ship swaying,  
How anger buffets us from off our course."  
The beings in the plane, with eyes that sifted  
Through fog and dark, looked down on man's abode.  
They saw the earth, her lovely face uplifted,  
While war in hob-nailed boots across her strode.  
Then suddenly the three-decked plane was sinking,  
"Weight of earth's fear. More power!" the captain cried.  
Her rockets flashed—a new star brightly blinking—  
And men who saw her go were mystified.

*Enola Chamberlin*

# EMPIRE OF DUST

BY BASIL WELLS

GERD KERN LEANED ACROSS THE DESK WHERE BLAND LOSSON SAT, his long slim fingers whitening as they gripped the emergency helmet at his belt. Inaudibly he cursed the porcine complacency of the stubby-limbed dwarf of a man.

"In two hours we'll be buried by the dust!" he shouted at his employer. "Already the jets are covered—another ten minutes and they'll be plugged!"

Losson blinked fat-pouched eyes, and a meager ghost of a smile pouted his thin lips.

"I hire good men," he said thickly. His fingers steepled before him on the desk. "The captain will do what is right."

"The captain is a fool!" snorted out Kern. "When I left him he was preparing to release rocket flares—and the *Freedom* is the only space ship to have blasted beyond Luna!"

Losson's pale eyes widened fractionally and he heaved his squat bulk erect. The gross millionaire's mat of gray hair was level with Kern's chest. His huge pale features hardened, and he thrust out his heavy jaw at Kern.

"What would *you* suggest?" he demanded.

"When we landed inside this shallow crater," the younger man said, "we sighted a sort of forest near the crater's heart. It appeared to be a sort of crystalline growth, but it lifted above the dunes for many feet.

"I'd suggest using the last of our fuel to drive into that growth. At least the dust won't smother us completely there as it certainly will here."

Losson's eyes blinked shut—then open again. He reached for the intercom, snapped it on, and signalled the spacer's bridge.

"Captain Blein," he snapped as the glaring eyes and sagging red features of the officer materialized on the screen, "blast the ship across the crater into the shelter of the central forest."

Blein controlled his trembling chin as best he could and saluted. His lips moved but he could not articulate.

"And snap it up," Losson bellowed, "before the sand buries us!"

Losson blacked the screen and turned to Gerd Kern.

"You can forget Blein's stupidity when you are writing up the record of our expedition here on Venus," he said. "Blein was a mistake, and Bland Losson does not make mistakes."

Kern shook his head. "You hired me to record the full story of your conquest of a new world. I'll write it as it happens, or you'll hire a new man."

The paunchy dwarf of a financier glared savagely, but a lurch of the deck underfoot cut off any unpleasantness he was about to vent. Both men sat down quickly in padded chairs and grasped the folding grips on either side of the seats. . . No time for shock hammocks!

The great ship freed herself reluctantly from the mounding whiteness of the dunes. In less than half an hour her gleaming metal ovoid had been almost buried by the mighty dust-laden winds of Venus.

She hopped and skittered like some ungainly frog across the crater's floor, but with every smashing impact the stout metal skin of the ship groaned and snapped. Losson swore at the roughness of the ride—and spat blood as a vicious jolt chopped his teeth through his tongue. After that he kept his jaws clamped shut.

Then the *Freedom* ran into an obstruction that arrested her mad ground-bound flight abruptly. Both men were ripped from their seats by the impact: Losson smashing into his desk, and Kern ploughing past the desk into the corridor beyond. Kern's pressure mask at his belt crunched double as he ended up against a painted metal bulkhead.

In an instant they were up and hurrying toward the control blister above; the anguished and terrified cries of the other passengers growing louder as they ran up the corridors. The passengers of the *Freedom*, twenty men and ten women, future colonists, unwittingly, of Losson's projected empire here on Venus, had been unprepared for the ground-hopping takeoff.

Four of them were badly injured, they learned later, and one man died in a matter of hours. . .

They climbed the ramp to the control rooms, Losson puffing valiantly, and charged into the knot of uniformed ship's officers and crewmen lining the transparent walls of the blister.

Kern's heart lost the tightness that had gripped it since first they grounded on the unbelievable aridity of Venus, and smashed forever the fable that Venus was a soggy water-swathed planet. For they had driven deep into the crystalline forest growth, and from the broken inner trunks of yellowish pulp, moisture dripped!

Bland Losson and Wimer Tarlby, both of them multi-millionaires disgruntled at the World Union's regulation of their vast strings of enterprises, had pooled their resources and constructed this huge spacer, the *Freedom*. Nor was the World Union averse to private individuals financing scientific exploration of outer space. The Second World Revolt had drained the treasuries of all the Terran states of the Union, and but one lunar cruiser remained in commission to protect the outpost on Luna.

Early in 1983 the *Freedom* blasted off from its base in Utah, its supposed goal, Mars. And with it had gone thirty passengers, mainly scientists and engineers, in addition to the crew of twenty. Losson and Tarlby had not informed their guests that in the



holds a hundred ultra-modern robots and a vast supply of equipment was stored. Nor did they let slip the fact that this expedition was to be one way—they carried only enough fuel for a one-way passage!

And once safely in space the *Freedom's* blunt bow headed in toward the sun, its true destination now revealed as Venus. There, on the cloudy wet planet, the two leaders of the party planned to establish a tight little state that would swiftly conquer a planet. Nor, until they had pierced down through the featureless blanket of Venusian atmosphere, had they permitted their "guests" the freedom of the ship..

Kern could smile now at the incredulous expressions on the faces of both Losson and Tarlby when they learned that they had gambled on winning a fertile world for their own—and found instead an arid dust-smothered wasteland of mighty craters and creeping powdery dust.

Nowhere had they spotted water or vegetation. The all-pervading milky dust blanketed Venus from pole to pole, and the eternal winds beat the atmosphere into a misty fog of grating tiny rock particles.

So they had grounded here in this broad shallow crater, hoping there to find some protection from the Venusian dust storms, and then the crippled ship had blasted into this clump of weird crystalline growth. . .

"It's moisture!" Kern cried eagerly. "See, Losson!" His finger pointed to the severed thick stub outside the blister.

"They're like cactus, with a tough glasslike outer coating that shield them from dust. And their roots must go down to water!"

Losson spread his short spraddled legs yet wider and rocked slightly back on his heels. He nodded.

"I'll have the robots put to work at once," he announced, "dropping a shaft into the depths. In a matter of days all this desolate crater will be green as Eden."

Behind them a harsh laugh sounded. Kern turned to see the too-sleek, too-handsome giant of a man who was Losson's partner, Wimer Tarlby. At sight of that smirking dark face Kern felt the same helpless rage he had known many times before. Though it had never been proved Kern knew that Tarlby's weapons and machines had been supplied in vast quantities to the revolting Mongols and their allies in the Second World Revolt.

"I suppose you'll freeze the wind and pipe away the dust," he gibed. "No, Losson, you've made a mistake this time and might as well admit it. Better fuel a life-boat and go back to Earth."

Losson shook his head. "Impossible," he grinned. "We have two message rockets we can send as a last resort, but the chances are remote that they'd reach Earth. Other than that we have no fuel."

Tarlby's handsome face grew scarlet. His sleek fingers probed at his balding forehead savagely.

"Fine mess you talked me into!" he raged. "Desert, dust and

no sunlight. Dust—sand and dust—that's your fine empire, your rich wilderness we were to conquer and exploit!"

His doubled fist came up, lashed out at Losson, and Kern slammed his shoulder into the dark man's side. Tarlby staggered backward and his fist merely grazed Losson's ear.

He roared and this time came at Kern, his eyes hot for the slighter man's blood. Kern grinned tautly, even though he knew Tarlby's trained muscles would probably mean his defeat. He might get in a few good blows, before he went down, to avenge the death of his brother and a million others like him. To him Tarlby was the symbol of the senseless destruction of the Second Revolt.

"Get out of the control room," Losson's voice cracked across the excited mumble of the blister's crew.

And in the squat dwarf's big hand a stub-snouted automatic menaced Tarlby.

Tarlby backed away, his jaw-muscles jerking, and his eyes hot. His lips contorted over soundless, but visible, oaths. Then the control room's heavy door swung shut behind him.

Losson turned to the crew. "Let's get busy uncrating the robots and the other gear," he said. "I want to reach water not later than ten hours from now."

Kern and one of the crew members, less than five hours later, pushed through a final clinging tapestry of pale orange and brown-leaved creepers into an emptiness that swiftly was recognized as a narrow beach. Black sand stretched before them for less than ten feet before it dipped beneath a lapping inky flood of water.

Eerie light, shifting and crackling softly overhead, revealed something of the vastness of the cavern they had reached. Here, almost a mile beneath the surface of Venus, they had come across a tideless sea rimmed by a grotesque jungle of sickly-hued growth.

"Lucky we found that dead branch so near the ship," the blocky crewman remarked. "Coming down that hollow stem was like using a stairway."

Kern nodded. His mind was stunned by the knowledge that the root systems of the crystal forests of Venus probed for a mile and more beneath the crust. Losson's robots would have worked for many days before they found this broad lake he faced.

A sound made him whirl to face the way he had come, and the light carbine in his hands lifted. An erect form, humanoid in outline, materialized in the twilight glow of the subvenusian world. And behind that first shape another shadowy bulk followed.

"Miss Selkirk!" The carbine dropped as Kern recognized Tarlby's plain-featured secretary.

Alda Selkirk's huge-lensed spectacles and her mannish garb robbed her of any pretensions at femininity. She was a very efficient secretary—and nothing more—to Wimer Tarlby. Perhaps that was why she had held her position for almost two years. . . . Tarlby's wife approved only those female employees less attractive than herself!

Behind Miss Selkirk a breathless Wimer Tarlby staggered. He sat down on the sable softness of the beach and groaned.

"Out of condition," he muttered. Then, turning to Miss Selkirk: "Flash a message back to the ship telling them what we've discovered."

Miss Selkirk's breathing was easy, the rough going through the slimy jungle growth from the creviced cavern wall had apparently winded her not at all. She snapped on the controls of the portable commy clipped into her wide belt.

"Mr. Tarlby wishes to announce the discovery of a vast underground lake," she began. "We followed Kern and one of the crew into the tunnel formed by a decayed. . ."

Tarlby snapped off the power and glared at the woman.

"I didn't tell you to mention anyone but myself," he said.

Miss Selkirk's laugh was caustic. "I suppose that case Kern carries on his belt is empty, and that throat mike he's wearing is to ward off devils."

"We've kept in touch with the ship all the time," Kern agreed, smiling at the woman's words. Apparently she liked Tarlby as little as did he.

Tarlby grunted disgustedly and came up from his knees to walk down to the brink of the sullen sea. Kern heard him curse excitedly, and turned to see what had caused this outburst.

Out of the twilight three rounded objects were creeping shoreward. They resembled giant irregular doughnuts, and in each bulky craft four upright objects swayed rhythmically as broad spoon-like paddles lashed the inky waters.

"Natives!" gulped Tarlby excitedly. And the automatic rifle was in his hands menacing the approaching craft.

Closer they came and ran aground on the shoaling waters a dozen feet offshore. The naked paddlers sprang overboard and started pushing their boats closer to the beach.

Now Kern could see that they were hunched broad-shouldered creatures, humanoid in the number of limbs and their upright carriage, but with a glistening dark layer of scales over their narrow skulls and shoulders.

"Fish heads!" snorted Tarlby. "I'll be emperor of a stinking mess of fish!"

Kern's mind closed upon the "I" in Tarlby's words. So the handsome playboy was thinking of this wasteland world as his own. Probably Losson was scheming to eliminate Tarlby in a like fashion, and among the imprisoned scientists the two financiers had shanghaied so cleverly a third party could very well have been formed.

There would be trouble among the expedition's ranks before many days had passed. And when it came Kern hoped the third group could win the upper hand—most of them were decent hard-working men and women of science.

The twelve fish men crowded closer, their great gashes of mouths grinning. They were unarmed save for the paddles that three of

them carried. And, despite the squat bulk of their short-legged bodies, their short-crested heads reached but to a man's armpit.

"Kneel, you scaly sons of slime!" ordered Tarlby, "to your new god."

He menaced them with the rifle, motioning them to kneel. And the throaty rasping mutter of the natives now expressed curiosity, and wonder. Tarlby swung down the weapon's barrel against a crested skull and the fish man squealed as pale grayish flesh peeled away. He cowered backward, one oddly splayed hand going up to the wound.

"No more of that, Tarlby!" Kern's fist balled and he sprang closer to the dark-skinned man. "We can't have the natives hostile."

Tarlby sneered. "I'm in charge of this expedition!" he cried. "Back away there or I'll blast you apart."

And the automatic rifle swung around for emphasis. Kern backed away, careful to keep his hands clear of the carbine he had reslung across his back.

Meanwhile the angry gabble of the fish people grew. They crowded together, surging closer around the tall Earthman, their great gashes of mouths flapping.

"Back there!" Tarlby's voice was suddenly taunt with fear.

The aroused scaly beings did not heed the menace in the dark man's tones. Their hands clawed for the gun, the sharp club they judged it, that had wounded their fellow, and they tugged at it.

The gun chattered briefly. The fish people melted away before that sudden barrage, and sagged to the dark-sanded beach as the bullets ripped out their vitals. And even then Tarlby continued to loose short bursts of fire into the quivering mounds of gray scaliness.

Kern shook off the paralysis induced by Tarlby's wanton slaughter of these simple Venusians. He sprang upon the bigger man, wrenched away the gun, and sent his right fist smashing into the snarling lips.

Tarlby staggered back, Kern's fists following and hammering, and the blood that spurted from Tarlby's crushed nose mingled with the redness of his battered lips. He fought back, after a moment, his fists marking Kern's features many times, but the lean-jawed writer felt nothing of that.

All the hatred he had bottled-up against this maker of wars and human misery was emptying itself into his blood. For the time being he was above such weaknesses as pain or logic. And the long descent from the ship had taken its toll of Tarlby's soft body. He was gasping for breath, his face darkening to purple.

Tarlby went down at last, slowly. His arms flung out, fingers clutching the sand, and he whimpered as his face ground into the gritty beach.

"Kern!" Alda Selkirk's voice was muffled, ending on a note of pain and terror.

He whirled about—to see a swarm of the clumsy-limbed fish men closing in! While they had battled the fellows of the slain

aborigines had paddled inshore—he caught a glimpse of a score or more of beached craft—and were upon them. The crewman, Smethers, had vanished, but he could see Alda struggling in the grip of three fish men.

They carried clubs, most of them, although a few were armed with the broad-bladed paddles from their boats, and as he reluctantly reached for the carbine a shower of clubs were flung at him. Several of them struck him, driving him to his knees.

His fingers fell away from the weapon, and the flickering half-light of the vast cavern dimmed. From far away the angry muttering speech of the Venusians sounded as he put all his strength into a last attempt to stand. He came up slowly, shaking his head dully, his eyes blurred.

Then a cruel impact drove his skull down into his shoulders and he fell forward into an endlessly screaming abyss of torment. . .

The light from without the low-roofed room where he lay was yellow and unsteady. He moved on the rattling bed of dried reeds and branches until he could see more clearly the blazing column of flame that began a short distance above a blackened gap in the rocky soil. Understanding came to him—this was a natural gas vent.

A quick sound of movement behind him made him swing around. He groaned as the weakness of his body and throbbing head grew.

"Gerd," a woman's voice cried out, "you're conscious?"

Kern grunted assent. It was Alda Selkirk who bent over him, her heavy glasses discarded now, and her mannish slacks and jacket ragged. Uncertainly he asked where they were, and why he lived.

"For almost two weeks we have been prisoners on this island," she told him. "Smethers escaped but so far no rescuers from the ship have shown up."

"Probably glad to be rid of Tarlby," Kern managed sourly. He sank back among the crackling debris that was his couch.

"I've learned the meager language of the *wifts*," Alda's hands were lifting his head and proffering a water-filled bowl of stone. "They've spared our lives, leaving our judgment to their mysterious gods—the Water People they're called—and less than ten hours ago I learned our fate.

"We are to be exiled to the upper crust, in a crater where another strange race of surface people is supposed to live. According to the wifts these people are as savage and bloodthirsty as are we—the reason they were banished from this *heavenly* cavern."

Kern grinned. Apparently Alda Selkirk had no love for the underground kingdom of the fish men. Then his thoughts sobered. On the outer crust of Venus the slashing dust and sand made human life impossible. Without pressure masks and tough outer garments of woven metal they could not exist.

If any race inhabited that arid hell above they must be of an alien life form, perhaps a silicon form of life requiring no carbon or water. To be sentenced to exile on the surface was a death

sentence after all. Their only hope would be that of escape along the way.

"How soon are we to be taken there?" he wanted to know.

Alda's mouth tightened. "As soon as you are awake. The wifts are anxious to see the last of us. And especially of Tarlby. They must keep him bound and the wifts hate cruelty even to their enemies."

"My head feels like it," said Kern dryly.

A shadow in the hut's doorway silenced them. Four of the fish people crowded into the room and silently lifted Kern from his bed. They carried him outside and one of them unstopped a ball-like container of greenish metal. From this an oval orange capsule rolled into the outspread grayish palm. Kern could see now that the bases of the four fingers and thumb were linked by a pale purple membrane.

"He says this is medicine sent for you by the Water People. Probably its some foul mixture concocted by the priests but you can do nothing but accept. It is to make you well."

"More probably to poison me," said Kern, "but I'm helpless. Give it here."

He took the capsule, swallowed hastily, and lay for a long minute studying the ugly huddle of a few score mud-daubed huts perched on a rocky ledge above an inky natural harbor. At the other end of the village a second natural torch of gas flared, and overhead the strange lightning play of electricity served to light the sombre scene.

Abruptly, then, he felt new life surging through his body. His head cleared and his strength returned swiftly. He stood up, a momentary dizziness passing, and felt the woman's strong grasp on his arm.

"I'm okay," he told her. "Tell our piscine friends I'm ready to leave."

A moment later the little party of humans and wifts were descending the rude steps hewn into the brown face of the low cliff, their goal the narrow stone pier where their clumsy reed boats were tied. And here, bound and lying in the bottom of an already manned craft, they saw Wilmer Tarlby.

He cursed at them, his eyes savage and his unshaven face filthy. Yet there was fear in the expression of his face, and his voice was shrill. For the first time in his life Tarlby had encountered a situation that money and his wits could not control.

"Better save your breath until we're on the surface," Kern suggested. "Or we get a chance to make a break."

But Tarlby's abuse grew louder, until at last one of the wifts stuffed a filthy scrap of coarsely woven cloth into the Earthman's mouth. The wifts and their two prisoners climbed into two other boats, and the three tiny boats of pitch-smeared reed shoved off into the gloom. . .

How long they paddled into the twilight depths Kern did

not know until later. Alda had kept her wristwatch intact and she made it ten hours.

But at last the lowering walls of the vast abyss lay before them and they entered a watery high-arched tunnel almost a hundred yards across. For almost another hour they paddled through Stygian gloom—here in the passage the wavering pale light of the cavern was absent—and then emerged into another and equally vast void.

Underneath them light increased and spread until they were floating above a radiant gulf that made pale the upper air. And now Kern could make out broad wheel-like ways and graceful buildings ringing them. Fragile towers and vast hemispheres of glowing blue and rich gold pushed upward until it seemed they must brush against them. He saw sleek finned shapes weaving among the fairy spires and dancing globes of changing living hue that swam with a slow current along the watery streets.

The light came from broad bands that apparently divided the smooth-paved ways in half, and as they paddled further into the increasing area of light, almost equalling that of an Earthly dawn, Kern could see odd egg-shaped vehicles moving along the ways.

"This must be the city of the Water People," cried Kern, awed at the extent and perfection of the submarine metropolis. "No wonder the wifts call them gods."

Alda called back agreement. "Soon," she said loudly, "we will reach the Place of Judgment. After that the wifts return."

Impatiently now Kern watched the growing bulk of a rounded tower that projected above the water's slow heave for a dozen feet. Larger it loomed until he saw a grassy oval, covering some twenty acres in all, with its outer rim notched in many places to form landing stages.

Into one of these the boats pushed, the prisoners were hoisted onto the miniature quay, and the fish men withdrew. Before they left, however, they hid their faces under their left armpits and chanted a weird, spine-chilling dirge that Kern decided must be a sort of hymn to the Water People they worshipped.

"I suppose you might as well," agreed Alda reluctantly, as Kern busied himself with Tarlby's bonds.

Tarlby growled something unintelligible when he was at last freed, and went on ahead of them toward the low buildings at the tower's grassy center. They followed, paying little heed to the beauty of the flowering grasses and velvety ferns about them. For the moment their thoughts were full of the unknown fate awaiting them.

The building roofed a glowing pool of clear water, in its center a submerged dais of polished green-veined marble. Even as they reached the pool's rim seven shadowy shapes came drifting up out of the translucent depths beneath and came to rest in its heart.

Kern had an impression of huge soft eyes, dark and wise beyond human comprehension, and of finned curving beauty that was

somehow humanoid yet more gracefully perfect. A weakness gripped him momentarily, and as it passed he sensed a vast pity and quiet amusement that he knew must emanate from the Water People.

As in a dream he felt his legs carrying him around and beyond the roofed-over pool. Beside him moved Alda and Tarlby. Tarlby's face was drained of color and his frozen eyes were wide, but Alda's face was serene—almost beautiful.

For the first time Kern felt a quickening of interest in the strong quiet woman who had proved to be his ally against Tarlby. He wondered why she had remained in the financier's employ so long. Surely a talented woman could have found other employment.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted. A dirigible-shaped vehicle blocked further advance. He saw that it poised on a single geared track above a circular orifice in the tower roof, and that the circular port was open.

They climbed inside, sat down in thick-cushioned seats of a salmon-red hue, and Kern found himself spinning two dials on the closed outer port. There was a sudden rattle of gears, a hiss as of released pressure, and the strange vehicle seemed to drop away beneath them.

In the pale blue light they sat tensely, the grip of the Water People's power over their minds slow in waning, as the continued hissing bore them along into the unknown. They could see nothing, the great projectile was windowless, but they sensed that they were descending and then climbing again.

The deck tilted, leveled off again and the hissing died. Immediately Kern started spinning the dials on the door, even though a faint warning far back in his brain whispered that only water might lie beyond the port. . .

And then they were looking out across a green-floored crater where tiny villages of snowy white stone and thatch nestled in tree-rimmed hollows! Overhead a glowing pale dome arched, a vast semi-transparent shield against the relentless gritting surge of the dust storms, and gleaming white columns, regularly spaced, lifted from the green depths to the roof.

Alda pointed off to the left. "An ancient city!" she gasped.

Tier upon tier the ruins climbed up the crater wall above them. Broken and creviced though they were Kern could not fail to see the perfection and simplicity of their design. Here was a city that had once rivaled the airy beauty of the Water People's sunken world. Thousands of people must have spent their lives among these soft-tinted walls and walked along these wide avenues of smooth gray stone.

"Kern! The ship! It's gone."

He turned back toward the little bullet-shaped vehicle that had brought them here. Only a gaping opening in the crater's faded yellow wall remained, and as he watched a thick panel of stone slid smoothly into place to seal it.

So it was that the three from Earth found themselves exiled



in the surface crater of Venus. Unarmed they were for the wifths of the cavern had stripped them of weapons, and they were without knowledge of the location of the *Freedom* or her crew. Here they might spend the rest of their natural lives. . .

"This is a paradise," Alda exclaimed as they descended the crater's inner grassy slope toward the nearest village. "I'm sure nothing evil could exist here."

Kern turned a doubtful eye in Tarlby's direction and Alda smiled. Tarlby was striding out ahead of them, his eyes greedy at this vision of rich fertile land.

Once he turned to them. "There must be more of these valleys on Venus," he said exultantly. "I'll link them together with tunnels and consolidate my empire."

"And the Water People?" Kern's face was stern. "Do you think they'll permit such exploitation of their world? The caverns and these outer valleys are theirs."

"Atom dust!" smirked Tarlby. "A few well-placed bombs or germ cultures and they'll be finished."

"Remember how easily they controlled us," warned Kern shortly. "Even now I imagine they're watching and listening. They're a highly cultured race, Tarlby. So far they've been kind to us but. . ."

Tarlby cursed and his strides lengthened. They were approaching the double rows of white huts, now, and as they followed the faint trail through a dense thicket of thorny green growth a great shout went up about them.

Kern halted, his fists balled, and at his side Alda faced the unseen foes defiantly.

"The Banished Ones," Alda said softly.

Then they were smothered beneath a flood of golden-skinned bodies. Kern's fist cracked more than one jaw before he was bound, and Alda left her mark on several of the golden warrior's bodies. But it was soon over and they were half-led, half-dragged down the path into the dusty square in the village's center.

Kern saw that their captors were short graceful men; even though their naked bodies were lightly scaled about the shoulders, their features were regular and their skulls well-shaped. Instead of the spiny crests sported by the cavern wifths these people had upright shocks of silvery hair.

They had knives of greenish metal in belted sheaths, and across their backs short barbed spears were slung. Many of them too carried short knotted cudgels that could be thrown or used as hand weapons. And among them were several taller and broader-shouldered warriors at whose sides swung slender two-edged swords.

As they neared the center of the dust-floored square Kern saw a ragged boulder of snowy stone, its top and sides stained with ominous black. He felt his muscles contract and his heart quickened its steady beat. This was an altar and there could be but one source of that spreading darkness—blood!

And now laughing children and lush-curved women swarmed about them curiously, tugging at their worn garments and exclaiming at their size and color. So they came to the altar.

"Their language is that of the wifts," Alda told Kern swiftly. "I do not think they mean to kill us, there is much talk of slaves, untilled fields and sword sport."

Tarlby was pushed up to the altar's top, his body shrunken and trembling with fear, and a sword-hung golden man sprang up beside him. A knife was in the warrior's hand and as he thrust it at the dark-faced Earthman, Tarlby screamed.

The knife slashed and Tarlby's shirt fell away. Again and again the warrior's knife sliced until the muscular body of the balding giant was entirely exposed. Then the golden-skinned man fingered the muscles and examined the teeth and eyes of the Earthman.

He began shouting something, and the natives crowded close.

Alda laughed. "It's a slave auction," she explained. "See they're bidding—holding up ornaments and tools."

"And then we'll be sold," Kern shrugged. "At least we will work in a green world and be near one another."

"I hope so," agreed Alda, "although there are other villages, and we may be separated."

Kern wondered why he had ever thought Alda plain and unattractive as they stood there so close together. Suddenly he could not endure the thought of being parted from her. She was a comrade as few men had ever been—strong, self-reliant, and witty. Yet she was something else. He was just beginning to realize how much she had come to mean to him.

"Not for long," he said softly, "would we be apart. I'll escape and take you with me."

Alda's eyes were warm and their bound hands met momentarily.

The bidding, meanwhile, was growing more spirited. A warrior, angered at a comrade's persistence, struck him across the face, and the other retaliated with a blow of his cudgel. The crowd laughed good-naturedly and fell back.

They fell to it, cudgel against cudgel. Blood began to stain that golden flesh, and scraps of silvery hair tore loose as the clubs thudded and ripped. A club went spinning and its owner drew his knife to come lunging in again at his foe. The other club dropped and they matched blade against blade.

And then, abruptly, the two men, red now rather than golden, flung their arms around each other and rocked with laughter. They sheathed their knives and walked, arm in arm, toward the nearest hut where they could cleanse their wounds.

Kern was to learn that the crater's inhabitants took their greatest enjoyment in warfare. A chronic feud existed between the crater's three villages, and even in the tiny communities duels were frequent. . .

The auction was resumed and Tarlby was knocked off at last to a plump, richly-ornamented woman who led him proudly away.

"She is Vioia, mate of the village's chief," said Alda. "He will be a servant in her hut rather than a field worker."

And Alda turned to the friendly-looking native she had been questioning.

A warrior pushed Kern forward toward the block. Two steps from its blackened bulk he halted and looked upward. And with him all the golden people looked. Then they dropped to one knee, their outspread webbed fingers over their lifted faces.

An eerie violet glow swelled, two luminous huge eyes in its heart, and slowly the godlike form and features of a Water Dweller materialized there. The golden people's chant was hushed.

And then the rich booming tones of the weird being filled his ears. Alien were the words but he felt a strange peace flood his mind and body. He heard the natives' chanting swell louder, and then the violet cloud faded.

Alda was beside him, her words tumbling over one another.

"We're to be their honored guests!" she cried. "The Water People probed our minds and approve of us. As for Tarlby—he's to remain a slave."

"And Tarlby thought he would have no trouble taking over Venus," grinned Kern. "I'm going to enjoy this."

Eln and Kir, their two golden-skinned friends, led the way along the narrow tunnel. In less than half an hour, they had promised, they would be hunting game in a deserted crater dome.

Kern and Alda carried bows and swords for weapons, the bows Kern's gift to the golden-skinned warriors, and their guides carried clubs as well as knives and bows. Their belt pouches were well-stuffed with dried grain and fruit—their search for game might prove fruitless and they intended exploring the other crater rather thoroughly.

"If we could only contact the ship," Alda said, "and tell them of this empty crater we're going to visit."

"That's why I suggested this hunting trip," Kern told her. "There may be a way of reaching the cavern seas from there. The cavern could be the World Union's first outpost on Venus."

"Providing the Water People approve," nodded the girl.

"Alda," blurted out Kern. "I've been wanting to ask you—why did you keep working for Tarlby?"

"I hadn't fallen in love with him, Kern," she smiled. "Is that what you meant?"

"You must have known about his connection with the Second Revolt, Alda. Surely you could have found other work."

Alda smiled. "I knew about Tarlby's activities," she agreed, "only not enough. And I also knew that you were assigned to Losson when our regular operative failed to be included in the expedition."

"The World Treasury!" Kern shouted. "You're an agent, not a draftee like me!" He clamped her shoulder. "We've enough now to send him up for life?"

"I think the kidnapping charge will hold both of them," Alda announced calmly, "if we ever get in touch with Earth again."

Eln, shorter of the two golden natives, turned to them.

"Have your weapons ready," he warned. "Sometimes the Wild Ones of the crater attack as we emerge."

They rounded a sharp turn in the rocky way and stood upon a broad vine-festooned shelf overlooking a verdant wilderness. Here too a ruined city of vast stone blocks and shattered towers climbed the crater walls, but there were no paths or white-walled villages in those tree-studded depths.

A winding ancient road, overgrown now with sprouting green life, worn downward. They descended through a green-walled tunnel, lizards scuttling away underfoot and featherless winged things croaking as they swooped from limb to limb above. They came at last to the mouth of one of the stone-rimmed tubes pumping watery life from the underground caverns. Deserted though it was the Water People continued to supply the crater with water.

Kern watched the stream plunge down over a rocky ledge and disappear from view. Eln and Kir paused to drink from the cups of their webbed palms, and in that ungarded moment the Wild Ones roared hideously, and attacked.

There were five of them, taller than an Earthman and broad. All their body was scaled, bony brown plates that overlapped, and their features were yet more hideous than those of the cavern wifts. About them there was a suggestion of saurian and piscine life so blended that only the more ghastly bodily characteristics endured.

Kir went down beneath their rush, his head crunched through inside a Wild One's gaping maw. But Eln was quicker and his cudgel shattered a narrow skull and battered his comrade's killer into limpness.

The other three sprang upon the Earthlings—to be met by sharp-edged swords. In the weeks of their exile among the golden race they had renewed their knowledge of fencing with a vengeance. There were frequent raids by other villages and the hairless-hided carnivores, whose packs denned in the crater walls, attacked the natives all-too-often.

So now Kern and Alda plied their sharp blades so effectively that in a matter of seconds a lone Wild One went bounding away into the sheltering jungle. They joined Eln, their swords yet unsheathed.

"Will they attack again?" asked Kern.

Eln shook his head. "From the darkness perhaps if we separate," he qualified, "but otherwise, no."

A flicker of movement caught Kern's eye. He spun about—to see the horny soles of a Wild One disappearing into the undergrowth! Others of the monsters must be hiding about them, dragging the dead bodies away!

He sprang after the disappearing feet, slashing at the broad rubbery leaves, and drew back quickly at what he saw.

The body swarmed with gaunt, knotty-spined rodent things, their hairless twisted bodies a foul shade of blue shading to yellow at the extremities. They were larger than housecats and their chisel-shaped front teeth were buried in the bony-scaled flesh as they dragged the corpse away.

He turned again to his companions. The little clearing beside the flowing water was alive with the hideous rodents, the fallen bodies moving mounds inching into the surrounding jungle.

"Do not fear," Eln called from the pathway. "They eat nothing but dead flesh. They are the scavengers of this crater, the eaters of offal."

And as Kern picked his way gingerly toward the others he saw that the great rat-things paid him no heed. Indeed they were not eating the newly dead flesh but were dragging it away into concealment until it was well-rotted and edible.

He regained the path and they headed again into the heart of the crater.

Later, before a rocky shelter, half-cave, half-hut, that other golden-skinned hunters had constructed, Kern finished dressing the goggle-eyed, pale-yellow creature, so like an earthly deer, and kindled a fire.

Alda and Eln had left camp to bring water from the central tiny lake of the crater while he finished his task. And far away, back the way they had come, a faint puff of dust lifted from a tardy rock's fall. Hardly had they reached the valley floor than a landslide roared past them from above, and even yet tiny rivulets of rock dust and stone followed that first roaring slide. . .

Kern wiped his knife and faced toward the lake. A frown creased his forehead. Long before this they should have returned.

And then a despairing shriek sent him bounding down the sunken game trail toward the lake.

He burst out into the marshy meadow that rimmed the little pond, his sword drawn and ready, and almost fell over the huddled golden body of Eln. An arrow transfixed the warrior's throat and another was jutting from his naked chest.

Alda was not in sight. He jerked back suddenly, an uncanny warning sparking his muscles, and a heavy arrow hissed where he had stood the barest fraction of a second before. He flung himself back into the shelter of the forest, a second arrow gouging flesh along his ribs.

The feathered shafts came from a jutting thicket further down the lake. Now, sheltered by the shaggy brown boles of the trees, Kern started loosing his own arrows in that direction.

A man's voice shouted, an Earthman's voice, and he watched warily as a shape was pushed forward from the shielding thicket. Then he cursed.

It was Alda, her arms bound behind her, and now he could see the triumphant dark face of Tarlby behind her.

"I have a knife in her ribs," Tarlby cried across the hundred feet that lay between. "She dies if you do not hold your arrows."

"Very well," agreed Kern. "And now, how did you come here?"

"Because of what Vioia told me. This deserted crater is linked with the cavern seas." He laughed. "I was like her pet dog; she humored my questions and petted me. Sometimes she kicked my ribs, however, and beat me."

"So today, when I saw you leaving for the other crater I repaid her for every blow with her own knife. Then I took her husband's weapons and followed."

"You cannot return to the golden ones, Kern," he finished, "for I climbed above the tunnel mouth and started a rockslide."

Kern made no reply. It was plain enough that for the moment he was helpless. Tarlby planned to return to the caverns and gain control of the *Freedom's* little party, of that he was sure. Equally sure was he that neither he or Alda would be alive to tell of the Water People's culture when Tarlby made his bid for leadership.

He backed away toward the rude hunting shelter where a fire yet burned. There he would eat and take the bow and arrows Alda had laid aside, before taking up Tarlby's trail.

So intent was he on his plans that he failed to note the dipping giant limb of a tree or the brown-scaled hide of the thing that crouched there. The first he knew of the ambush awaiting him was when a hurtling weight drove his face and body deep into the spongy leaf-mould beside the sunken trail.

They rolled over and over, Kern trying for his knife, and the filthy nails and bony-plated jaws of the Wild One ripping at his body. He felt wetness that was his own blood as the handle of his knife came into his hand, and weakness was making slow his muscles as he struck. And the weapon turned aside!

He struck again, the knife burying to the hilt despite the tough brown scales, and the Wild One shuddered and released him. Kern staggered to his feet and the Wild One circled him, the wound in his chest leaking blood, though one huge fist strove vainly to cork it.

The Wild One hurled himself at Kern again, but that second's respite had given him time to draw his sword. The sword sheared through an upraised forearm, and, as the Wild One swung about again, Kern drove its keen length deep into the scaly brute's vitals.

Kern reeled on unsteady legs toward the hunting lodge. He walked through a quivering twilight that at times became almost complete night. But he came at last to the glowing embers of the fire and staggered past them toward the rude shelter of the cave's walls.

He fell forward, the darkness wavering and murmuring about him. Far away he heard voices, and many miles away rough hands knotted cords about a pair of wrists that somehow were linked with his body. His weakness and the darkness combined to thrust

nightmares upon him in which he heard the voices of Tarlby and Alda.

"He'll die slowly this way," the nightmare's voice gloated. "The rat things will gather, even as they gather about this offal by the fire, and he will awaken with their teeth ripping the flesh from his bones."

"Kill him," the distant voice of a disembodied Alda begged. "Be merciful. Don't make him suffer more."

And then the mad laughter of the invisible phantom within his brain echoed eerily. Silence enfolded him again and he was rocking along on an uneasy Stygian sea. . .

Much later he stirred and tried to sit up. His hands were lashed behind him and his feet were bound too. He had not dreamed, then, about Tarlby and Alda being near him. A silent ring of the rodent creatures, their hideous knotty-spined bodies crouched, watched with beady eyes.

But they had not touched him. Tarlby had not known, as did Alda, that they touched nothing but dead flesh. And, knowing the vengeful nature of the man, she had begged him to spare Kern such torture.

His wounds were closed—painful and sore but not deep. All that remained now was to follow Tarlby and rescue Alda—once his limbs were free!

He considered smearing his bonds with fat from the slain creature swinging from a nearby limb. That idea he discarded immediately. Even though the rodent-things might crave the spoiling flesh they would not venture close to his yet-living flesh to gnaw away the cords.

His weapons were gone and the fire was out. He rolled nearer to the ashes, blew on them hopefully, and cursed silently.

And then his eyes caught the bright gleam of a small rock among the ashes, a rock splintered apart by the heat of the fire!

He lost an hour or more, and opened a wound on his chest, before he finally succeeded in wedging the sharp sliver of rock between two roots and sawing his bound wrists apart.

Then, his only weapon a rotten knotted stick, he set off to trail Tarlby and his captive.

How many hours he had lain unconscious he did not know, nor did the sunless glow of the overhead dome give him any clue, but he felt sure that at least one night had passed. They would be far ahead of him by now, possibly descending the cavern-rift from the crater.

That Tarlby would force Alda to accompany him most of the way Kern felt sure, he enjoyed his role of master too well to kill her at once, but should he sight others of the party the girl would die. He must overtake them quickly.

So it was that he circled the great crater's outer walls, his eyes intent for any sign of their passing, and before he had gone two miles he came upon a broken frond of a dwarfish arboraceous

fern beside the trail. The bruised frond dangled level with his waist, and two paces further along the imprint of narrow walking boots pressed deeply into the leafy debris pointing toward the cave-pocked wall.

He followed the tracks, confident that Alda had left this sign for him, and now he saw that her tracks overlaid the spoor of Tarlby. He was leading her across the narrow tongue of jungle left toward a gaping crevice in the vertical crater-wall.

Kern parted the vines barring the crevice's lower mouth, and entered. Ahead of him a crooked way, its floor uneven and studded with grotesque toadstools, gashed deep into the gloom. He pushed inward, his poor club ready in his hands.

The great split became a tunnel that dipped downward. As the light from the crater faded a glow took its place. A hand's breadth above his head a narrow band of intense white light shone from a sunken slot. His hand touched it, and he felt the smoothness of polished cool glass or quartz.

The way widened until he was descending into a shattered inferno of narrow canyon-like rifts and here the band of light on his right hand was replaced by a sparse peppering of dusty glowing spheres. Here pallid lizard creatures scurried underfoot and he heard the distant drip-drip of water from moisture-laden walls.

The cavern seas could not be too far ahead.

A human voice boomed hollowly off to the left. He was lost now in the maze of intertwining ledges and rotten stone barriers; so he welcomed this sound and headed toward it.

The sound grew plainer, and now a higher sweeter voice answered the first speaker. Kern forgot the aching torment of his scarred body as he recognized that of Alda. Apparently they had lost their way in the underground maze leading to the sea.

"I'll not come down," Alda was saying calmly. "You might as well leave me here and go on."

Tarlby cursed and a bowstring twanged. Then Kern rounded a knife-edged shoulder of shadowy rock and looked down into a rocky pocket where the light from above shone clear.

The dark-faced man stood in the little arena's center, his eyes lifted to a ledge directly opposite where Kern stood. And there wedged into the shelter of a shallow cave's overhang, was Alda. Beside her lay a sword, but so sheer was the ten-foot drop below, that her bare hands could have swept a climbing man back.

Soon Tarlby would realize that she lay exposed to his arrows only from this vantage point where Kern watched, and so the lanky writer dropped back into the shelter of the knife-edged jut of stone.

Tarlby came climbing toward him, grunting and cursing. Kern swung his club, his desire to match strength with strength tempered by the knowledge that he was too weak. And Alda's life depended on his defeat of the financier.

"Last chance!" roared Tarlby in triumph as he gained the



elevation he needed. His bow came up, the arrow half-drawn.

Kern crept closer, club swinging up. And across the rocky picket Alda flattened her body defiantly against the sheltering stone.

The club swung down. Tarlby, warned somehow, flung himself aside. The club crunched and broke across the big man's naked left shoulder. Kern fought down the empty feeling engulfing his vitals and staggered forward.

Tarlby's arm swung limp, but his other hand whipped down toward his sword. Kern launched himself forward with the last ounce of his strength, his head smacking into the other's fat-padded middle. And Tarlby jarred backward a step — into emptiness!

But he carried Kern with him. His one good hand tangled in Kern's hair and clung. Down they plunged, to land with a snapping thud on the rocky floor ten feet below! And Kern crawled off the inert body weakly even as Alda reached his side.

She kissed him, her fingers tender as they examined his wounds, and Kern's eyes closed wearily as she told him of her slipping off the lashings about her wrists as they roamed the labyrinth of miniature gorges. She had been carrying part of Tarlby's loot, the sword most important of it all, and had lain hidden on the upper ledge for hours before he found her again.

"He is dead?" Kern managed to cut in at last.

Alda shuddered. "His neck was broken," she said, nodding, "and the rodent-things are dragging away his body. He is dead."

He lay back relaxed, his head in Alda's lap, and they sketched idle dreams of the future. How they would guide the other passengers to the deserted crater and there establish a little slice of their native Earth, occupied most of their talk, but they found time for more intimate planning.

Neither of them saw the square of glowing gray material, a detailed map of the lower caverns, that drifted down from a glowing circle of violet light to lie beside them, until they prepared to leave.

"The Water People!" cried Kern, holding it up before Alda. "Even the location of the party from the *Freedom* is shown. It means they welcome us to Venus."

Alda smiled up at him, and arm in arm they started slowly down the well-mapped trail to the cavern seas.

# BLACK GOLDFISH

BY JOHN TAINE

**SYNOPSIS:** Biochemist Jones develops a process of synthesizing vitamins, but Klaup, a refugee Jones has befriended, steals the process and obtains the patent. Klaup gets a government contract to supply vitamins to the military personnel. Jones, knowing Klaup is an enemy agent, enlists the aid of the military's Chief of Staff and Klaup's colored housekeeper, Cleo, in baiting a trap for Klaup.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONTROLS

THE WEEKS OF FEVERISH PREPARATION for defense slipped by like days. There could be no doubt that the nation was tackling the gigantic task with a united will and an amazing energy new to its history. Tasks that ordinarily would have taken a month were disposed of in a week. Instead of stepping up airplane production the promised hundred percent, the tireless workers trebled the output in the first two months. Tanks rolled out of the factories, operating full blast twenty-four hours a day, like potatoes from a hopper. Machine guns, anti-aircraft guns and field artillery deluged the countryside round thirty thousand industrial plants, while heavy stuff for the navy and coast artillery blocked the transcontinental railways from coast to coast. To relieve the congestion, new lines were laid like a spider web with frantic haste by an army of seven million older men and young women toiling ceaselessly in twelve hour shifts.

Schools closed, releasing their swarms of vitamized children like a plague of locusts wherever there was a crop to be harvested. Where farm machinery lacked, hundreds of pairs of untiring hands pulled and tugged and plucked from long before sunrise till hours after the chickens had gone to roost. Six hours sleep refreshed the weariest for another eighteen-hour day with only forty-five minutes out for a fortified breakfast, dinner and supper. There had been nothing like this explosion of mass industry and labor in the history of the world. Not even the teeming orient with its swarming slaves inured to desperate poverty and unceasing drudgery could match the furious activity of the vitamized children. Only a plague of voracious insects could have competed against their devouring energy.

But it was in the armed forces of the nation that the most spectacular successes were achieved. From dawn to dawn the skies thundered with the roar of air armadas fighting sham battles over the length and breadth of the continent. The constantly fortified aviators seemed to see in the

dark. Crashes and head-on collisions were avoided by a margin of inches, and dive bombers plummeted to within a hundred feet of their objectives before pulling out and rocketing skyward. The pilots seemed to have forgotten that they ever knew what nerves were. Their senses sharpened many times beyond normal, they narrowed the band between safety and supersonic disaster from yards to fractions of an inch.

A corresponding snap, precision, and initiative distinguished the new ground armies from all in preceding history. A forced march of thirty miles a day with full equipment came to be looked upon as a holiday jaunt after a week of juggling all the new gadgets of the super-mechanized army. Before the troops were vitaminized, only the rare mechanical genius in a regiment was complete master of all the destructive and protective machinery in his outfit. A single month's feeding sufficed to pep up the mentality of the least mechanical U.M.T. draftee to the point where he could dismantle and reassemble the most complicated mechanism with scarcely a false move. All ranks responded to the biochemical kick in the pants, as Major Evans called the daily dose of vitamin. Even the generals reacted noticeably, and there was a marked decrease in the traditional tendency of the general staff to strangle itself with red tape. Surely, the public thought, no aggressor would be so foolhardy as to attack a nation prepared as was theirs. They were warned by the Chief of Staff that they were mistaken. It was no time for wishful mooning.

The Chief of Staff did not himself caution the nation against the insidious disease of optimism, the most dangerous of all maladies in time of threatened war. For one thing, he was about as inspiring a speaker as a wooden Indian. For another, it was against military etiquette for a high officer to make any intelligent public statement. Events over which he had no control might prove that he had not known what he was talking about. But it was imperative that there be no slackening in the output of arms and munitions, and no softening of military discipline. Somebody the public liked and respected must tell them the brutal truth. The obvious candidate for this necessary but unpleasant job was Dr. Klaup, whose name, if not on every lip, was almost in several million stomachs.

Klaup accepted the assignment with pride and alacrity. All the bustle and excitement for the preparedness program, he imagined, were alone responsible for his own tireless energy. Jones, if asked, might have hinted that vitamin omega had something to do with the great biochemist's unusual bounce and bumptiousness. Three times daily — at breakfast, at dinner, and at supper — Klaup went on the air with a stirring sales talk for omega. There was something so richly vital about the doctor's well nourished voice that even the weariest housewife tuned in on the broadcast at every meal, dreaming of the day when she, too, would be fortified with omega and dish washing would become a pleasure. Klaup was in fact bending the national emergency to his own far-sighted purposes, looking to the day when the crisis would be history and he must find new markets for vitamin omega. When the Chief of Staff requested him to cooperate with the army by warning the nation of its continued and imminent danger, Klaup recognized, but was powerless to grasp, the opportunity of his life. His warning to all his fellow citizens was

unusually brief — for him — and strictly to the point. The Chief of Staff had seen to that. Over the palpitating biochemist's protests he had ruthlessly pruned away all the lush advertising accompanying the warning, till little more than a 'danger ahead' signal remained. Klaup agreed to conclude each of his pep talks with the following plain statement of fact.

"I am instructed by the Chief of Staff of the Army to inform you that the nation is still dangerously underarmed and unprepared to defend itself against aggression. We have still far to go before we can hope to equal our potential enemy's resources in armament and trained personnel. The enemy has been preparing for aggression against us ever since the conclusion of the Second World War. Our preparations for defense have been organized only for a matter of months. In the detail of jet planes alone the enemy outnumbers us about three to one. He also is hastening preparation. We cannot doubt whom he is planning to attack. If we are to repel invasion, it is necessary that our armament be increased to at least three times its present strength within the next four months. It is not likely that the aggressor will defer his attack until we are fully armed."

No a word about vitamin omega. Poor Klaup; if only they had let him conclude with an announcement that the daily dose of omega was to be trebled to meet the emergency his future would have been assured. But the Chief of Staff was an insensitive man, callously indifferent to the legitimate claims of business enterprise. It is true that he was tempted for a dangerous minute of two to accept Klaup's hinted gift of a block of shares in the Klaup Drug and Chemical Products Corporation as a slight token of the great biochemist's personal esteem. But after consultation with Colonel Gregory, the Chief decided that his strategy had been sound in ignoring Klaup's broad hints and not seeing the proffered bribe.

"The intelligence division is quite sure of its facts?" he asked the Colonel.

"Absolutely. Klaup's attempt to bribe you was just the obvious sort of thing a stupid man would try as a blind. Unless —"

Colonel Gregory's confidence deserted him. Was Klaup as stupid as he seemed?

"Unless what?" the Chief prompted.

"Unless he was sounding you out to see whether you suspect him of anything. I hope you had the presence of mind to act just dumb?"

The Chief was slightly miffed. "I did my damndest," he replied somewhat huffily.

"No offense; I'm sure you did all right. But just suppose for the sake of argument that you had looked intelligent. What would Klaup have inferred?"

"How in blazes should I know?" the long-suffering Chief of Staff exploded. "What are you getting at?"

"Just this. If you had refused the bribe intelligently — no, that's not what I mean; if you had looked intelligent when you didn't fall for Klaup's offer, he would have suspected you of knowing more than you are supposed to know."

The Chief glared at his intelligence officer with murder in his eye.

"Look here," he snapped. "Once for all, I'm just a plain soldier. I know nothing of metaphysics and I care less. Logic — if that's what

you're talking — almost ruined my career. If the man who taught it at the military college hadn't died before I could flunk it for the third time I shouldn't be here now. If —"

"But that's logic," Colonel Gregory interrupted. Sensing his tactical blunder, he hurried on. "Suppose that Klaup thought you turned down the bribe in the full possession of all your faculties. He would infer that you thought the stock in his company was worthless. Then he would know that we suspect him, and our game would be up."

"You make my head ache. If Klaup is the fool your department says he is, he would just think I was incorruptible. Hang it! That's not what I mean. Anyhow, logic or no logic, he wouldn't think me such a dummy as to give our game away by telling him his stock isn't worth the paper it's printed on."

Colonel Gregory looked doubtful. "That's just the point. My agents never have any difficulty in turning an intelligent suspect inside out. It's the stupid ones that give all the trouble. They act by a sort of instinct and defy all the laws of logic and reason with impunity."

"Well, so do I. If I stopped to argue with the enemy, could I defeat him by proving to my own satisfaction that his head wasn't on straight? Take it from me, a single hundred pound atom bomb is more convincing than a thousand tons of syllogisms — I think that's what the old fellow who tried to teach us logic called them. And to end this particular argument, I'm going to call in Jones and get some facts. There's a man I can understand. He speaks my language."

When Jones arrived he appeared in his private's uniform, now somewhat the worse for wear. The Chief of Staff attacked at once.

"To settle an argument between Colonel Gregory and me, I want you to tell us again exactly what you make of the last six reports of the intelligence department."

"The reports on enemy activities south of the border?"

"Yes."

Jones reported in a single short sentence.

"The enemy's food is being fortified with vitamin omega."

"Is being, you say. How long, in your opinion, has this vitamin fortification been going on?"

"Since a week or ten days after we started our own program of vitamin fortification."

The Chief turned to Colonel Gregory. "Does that check with what your men reported?"

"It checks."

"Then, Mr. Jones, what do you infer?" The Chief favored Gregory with a grimace of distaste. "I have just learned from the intelligence department," he explained for Jones' benefit, "that when a common man like you or me uses his head or his common sense, he is inferring. Now, Mr. Jones, will you please infer for us?"

"I infer," Jones replied without including the squirming Colonel in his inferences, "that Dr. Klaup has given the enemy my process for synthesizing vitamin omega. And I further infer that the enemy is manufacturing a quantity of vitamin omega sufficient to fortify all the rations of all his armed forces with precisely the right amount three times

daily. As my concluding inference, I infer from the reports of the intelligence department that this exactly right fortification began within a week or ten days after the beginning of our own program."

"From which I infer," the Chief took up the tale, "that Dr. Klaup is a traitor. As such in time of war he is liable to trial by court martial and summary execution if found guilty." He turned to Colonel Gregory. "Has your department proved his guilt?"

"Not yet."

"Is there any prospect of your department proving Klaup's guilt?"

"None that I can see. A single short-wave message in code would have been enough to transmit the necessary information to the enemy. With all the scientific equipment of his laboratories, Klaup could have put together a short wave set. He could have sent a message at any time before we began our vitamin program. But he could not very well have sent any message without our knowledge since. The eight men we have in his laboratories know everything he does while there; and he is never out of sight of two of the four men detailed to watch him on his travels round the country broadcasting. There is no short wave set at present in his laboratories or in his living quarters. The one he evidently used must have been destroyed immediately after he sent the message. No pieces of such a set have been found. It is possible, of course, that he sent instructions by a spy who managed to slip across the border before our patrol became effective. If so, there is obviously no hope of tracing the man down there, and he has no reason to cross the border. He will stay where he is."

"So the intelligence department is not likely to aid the prosecution?"

"Check."

"What about you, Mr. Jones? Do you still insist upon claiming your half ton of flesh?"

Jones shook his head. "I don't want to see Klaup shot or hanged, whichever it is that military etiquette prescribes in cases like his. But I have promised Cleo that she can call him anything she likes when Klaup proves himself guilty. It is the only way Klaup can ever be convicted, and Cleo will deserve her pay."

The Chief of Staff looked thoughtful. "I am just wondering," he confessed, "what will happen to all of us if you should have guessed wrong."

For a moment Jones was startled. Had he ever really faced the possibility that there might be some loophole, some trivial flaw, in his delicate trap that would not only provide Klaup with an escape at the critical moment but, infinitely more disastrously, enable the aggressor to break through? The waking nightmare vanished in a blaze of certainty. He had not blundered.

"If I had a hundred and thirty million lives to bet on the security of the nation, I would bet them all. The trap is tight."

"You seem as confident as ever. I hope you are right. If not —."

"How can I be wrong? If Colonel Gregory's agents have reported the plain, obvious facts correctly, I can't be wrong. It is not a case of them having to infer anything. All they have to do is to use their eyes and describe exactly what they see. And what have they seen? Step by step

the fighting forces of the enemy have followed exactly the same road as our controls. Their morale is now excellent. What was it like when Colonel Gregory's men reported about the enemy substitute for potatoes? They said that unless the lack of vitamins was remedied all ranks would be unfit for combat in six months or less. By the latest report the enemy's aviators are now as good as our own. And so it goes all down the line. For every advance of ours there is an exactly parallel advance of theirs."

"You almost persuade me to be an optimist," the Chief sighed. "But not quite. The only arguments that really carry conviction are the controls. When I look at them, I feel like saluting."

"Well, come and have a look at them now. I'm not busy this morning."

"Thanks, I shall. I'm feeling low, I don't know why."

Jones silently offered him a pill, which the Chief solemnly swallowed. "Coming with us, Gregory?"

"Not now. I want to enjoy my lunch."

"All we have to do," Jones argued earnestly as he followed the Chief out, "is to keep our nerve and sit tight when the invasion starts."

"Or run away. It's going to be a sore trial for a poor military man like me. I wish I were a chemist."

## CHAPTER V HARD SAUCE

A STEADY DRONE FILLED THE AIR with a muffled vibration that beat down from the cloudless skies and enveloped the earth. They were coming at last, sixty thousand of them, opening the latest undeclared war with the greatest air raid in history. Probably Jones was the only human being to see the planes surge over the mountains in wave after wave of black specks against the brassy sky. His job was finished, and he felt that he had earned a rest. He took it in the exact spot where he had sat down to wait for the bomber that picked him up six months before. A swift fighter plane had landed him shortly before dawn. Then it had flown off again, leaving him alone on the barren plain. As the rising sun flooded the sky with amber light, the air began to tremble. Rising to his feet, the solitary watcher trained his field glasses on the sky above the mountains to the South. The tremble had increased to an audible vibration. The first planes, like a flight of midges, speckled the sky. They were flying high and fast. Silvery jets trailed behind them in the clear air. They were the latest models. In less than four minutes they were shooting overhead, straight on their course to the great cities to the north east. The last wave followed them and disappeared fifteen minutes later.

Jones threw away his field glasses, straightened his ragged coat, and started walking briskly along the road in the direction of civilization. Although he was not in uniform, he saluted the sky in the direction the planes had taken. His saluting technique had improved. This salute, to be his last, was not a gesture of respect to the aviators who might rise to repel the invader.

"You poor damned fools," he scoffed, "you asked for it. Here's to your health."

Ten miles farther on he flagged a distracted truck driver on the transcontinental highway and begged a lift to the city.

"I've been on leave, and unless I join my unit today I'll be court-martialed."

"Where's your uniform?" the truck driver demanded suspiciously.

"At Dr. Klaup's house in the city. I'm a friend of his, and I left my things there. My folks have a farm out this way."

"O. K. Any friend of Klaup's is a friend of mine. Boy! what that man has done for the country!"

"He sure has," Jones agreed, climbing aboard. "Did you see the planes come over?"

"No, but I heard them. What's going to happen? Suppose our boys are good enough?"

"I'll say. They're probably chasing hell out of them right now."

And so the morning passed in a rosy glow of optimism. By the time they reached the outskirts of the city the truck driver was convinced that Jones was an expert on strategy and tactics. He dropped his passenger in a suburb, and clattered on his way through a maze of strangely silent streets. The city seemed to be dead. As a matter of fact it was only stunned.

Jones arrived at Klaup's house just in time for dinner. Cleo admitted him. Her face was once more the blank mask of the perfectly trained seryant.

"Dr. Klaup is expecting me. I'll go right in."

"Yes, sir. He is in the dining room."

Just about to sit down to his ample repast, Klaup waddled out into the hallway and greeted Jones effusively.

"I knew you would come back," he burred. "Yes, I got your letter. Well, well. So they couldn't make a soldier out of you. I could have told them that six months ago. You should have accepted my offer then. No bones broken, and no hard feelings on either side. Am I right? Fine! You've had your fun, and now we can both get to work. A new order is dawning! As my assistant, who knows but that you may aid in the synthesis of a vitamin even more beneficial than omega to toiling humanity?"

"I shouldn't be in the least surprised," Jones agreed enigmatically, as the hospitable Klaup shooed him into the dining room. "I'm to come back at my old pay?"

"Why, of course. Oh, Cleo," he shouted. "Black Goldfish! Ah, there you are. Set another place. Mr. Jones is dining with me."

"Yes, sir."

The great biochemist cast a troubled glance at the enormous planked steak before his own plate, and sighed. "Is there another steak in the refrigerator?"

"No, sir."

"That's all right," Jones interposed hastily. "I stopped at a lunch counter on the way. One soda cracker and a cup of strong black coffee will do me. One cracker, no more, no less, Cleo."



"Yes, sir." By the gleam in her eyes he knew that she understood the sly reference to Klaup's one pill of omega daily in his morning coffee."

Klaup glanced at his watch. "He's going on now," he announced, fiddling with the small radio on the sideboard.

"Who?" Jones demanded, although he knew. He had even helped to knock some of the prospective speaker's remarks into shape all of two weeks before he 'resigned' from the army.

"The Chief of Staff. Important message to the nation. There he is now. Sit down; I'll go ahead while the steak is hot. Your's will be here in a minute."

To the noisy accompaniment of Klaup's feeding, the Chief of Staff laid down his staccato barrage of bad news. Sixty thousand enemy planes had invaded the country. No bombs had been dropped—yet. The raid was purely one of propaganda. As such it was the first of its kind in military history. Thousands of tons of leaflets had been dropped on all the major cities, including the capital, but not a single bomb. By radio from the invading planes, the enemy had warned that if they were attacked while dumping their literature, they would let loose with all the stuff they carried, and they had plenty. Consequently no planes had taken off to offer combat to the invaders. The commanders at many of the airdromes had been forced to use stern measures to keep all their pilots grounded.

"Discipline must be maintained," the Chief of Staff explained patiently. "A premature offensive is worse than none." He continued with the platitudes sanctioned in military emergencies by decades of modern warfare. "We have the situation well in hand. There is no cause for alarm. Civilians will go about their business as usual. The threats which the enemy has showered on you from the skies are to be disregarded. The Boy Aids will collect and destroy all leaflets dropped by the enemy. The Fireside Girls will —."

What it might be that the Fireside Girls were to do remained unheard. A raucous bellow from the radio drowned the Chief of Staff's fireside message. The enemy had seized the air.

"Our brave airmen have all returned safely after dropping their leaflets. Before crossing the border on their homeward flight they dropped the principal cargo they had been ordered to deliver, one hundred and twenty thousand fully equipped parachute troops. Within forty-eight hours ten similar cargoes will be delivered to you. The first army is already proceeding north. Resistance is useless. Surrender unconditionally or be crushed."

Jones rose slowly to his feet, the picture of dismay. "They must have come down in that uninhabited stretch between the transcontinental highway and the border. Do you suppose it is defended?"

Klaup masticated a huge gobbet of steak thoroughly before replying. "Probably not. Democracies are always inefficient."

Jones flushed. "You forget our air force," he said quietly.

"I was thinking of it," Klaup confided, spearing an enormous dill pickle the color of a dead slug. "What can our puny force do? For every one of our planes they have twelve."

"How do you know that?"

"I have been telling the nation so every morning at breakfast for months. The Chief of Staff gave me the figures."

"Oh. I suppose you're right. I thought you said it was three to one when you broadcast."

"Combat planes. Three of theirs to one of ours." He speared another pickle, gulped it, and sawed at the steak. "Transport planes weren't included. Three combat planes are enough to escort a transport loaded with parachute troops. Motorcycles too," he added with evident relish. "The sooner this nation lays down its arms the better."

Jones regarded him curiously, as a research doctor might look at an interesting pathological specimen. "Sure you haven't been dreaming all this?"

Klaup did not reply immediately. Jones eyed him more closely. Had he heard? He repeated his question.

"Eh, what?" Klaup laid down his fork, baited as it was with a chunk of half-raw cow flesh, and stared glassily at Jones. His flabby face had a foolish, fuddled look, as if he had been drinking heavily.

"I just asked how you know so much about the enemy's planes."

The dazed look gave way to an ashen alarm. "What did I say?"

"You said they outnumber us twelve to one in planes."

"Did I? No, I couldn't have said that. Or," he added defiantly, "if I did, I didn't know what I was saying." Jones almost felt sorry for the glutton who for once forgot his food. "I have been overworking," Klaup continued. He mopped his face with his napkin. "I know nothing beyond what the Chief of Staff told me to broadcast."

"So I thought. Do you have these waking dreams often?"

"What dreams?"

"Never mind. How are you sleeping now, anyhow?"

"As usual. Naturally," he qualified, stifling a gigantic yawn, "I need more sleep now that I'm working so hard."

"Sure. And your appetite, how's it?"

Klaup gazed ruefully at the planked steak, only half devoured, and pushed it away. "Not so good as it was." He gaped again, openly. "In fact," he yawned, "I don't — ah-yaw — want any — yaaw-haw — desert. Black Goldfish!" he bellowed, "Black — eeh — yah — haaw."

"Better go to bed," Jones advised. "You're dead for sleep. I'll find my way out."

Cleo entered just as Klaup rose heavily from the table. "Take it — yaawh — all — heeyah-haw — away."

"Yes, sir."

Without a goodnight to either of them, Klaup stumbled off to bed, leaving Jones and Cleo to finish the feast if they chose.

"What's for desert?" Jones asked.

"English plum pudding with hard sauce."

"Bring it on. I'm as hungry as a Klaup should be. But work before dinner, that's me."

Cleo served him circumspectly, a model of discretion. Mr. Jones should have the privilege of leading. He led with an ace. "Sit down," he said. "Care for some of this? O. K., I can finish it myself while the doctor is

tucking himself up in bed — or falling into it." Cleo giggled. "I'm not being funny," Jones went on seriously. "Give him another day or two, and he won't be able to lace his shoes. You've done your job well. I couldn't have timed it better myself. Any pills left?"

"Enough for a week."

"Throw them away, or keep them as souvenirs. They won't be needed. Now, about our bargain. You will fly to the Capital tomorrow."

"Me?" She thought he was joking.

"Yes, you. To collect your reward. You may not get it for as much as a week. Or you may collect the day after tomorrow. I can't figure that close. But in any event, it won't be more than eight days now, and you might as well be on hand. Dr. Klaup will be going too. I shall go with him. You will follow about an hour after we leave. A Mr. Ellis will call for you here at the house to drive you to the landing field. They will be expecting you there, and you will be met at the Capital. What you do after that depends on how things go."

She was like a four-year-old listening to a creepy fairy tale, wanting it to stop and go on at the same time. "Oh," she said.

Jones finished the pudding. "Give the cook my compliments for a masterpiece. Is the telephone in the doctor's laboratory working? All right. Just slip along the hallway and listen if he is asleep. He should be snoring by now."

Cleo reported that the snores were louder than usual.

"Fine." He looked at her critically. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you have the brains not to pester me with questions at this stage of the game. Everything will come out before another week, perhaps sooner. Then you will see for yourself. There is just one thing I should like to know before turning in. Do you want to see Dr. Klaup killed?"

Her eyes grew round with fear. "Are they going to kill him?"

"You've answered. To tell you the plain truth, I don't know what they will do. I have a half promise from them to be lenient with him. But the country is at war, and —"

"Are we going to win?" she asked breathlessly.

"We have won already, only the enemy doesn't know it. Now don't," he warned, "get hysterical if there is some shooting. And remember your training if there is a real air raid. That sort of thing won't last longer than a week at the most. You have your instructions what to do in case of an alarm? Well, do exactly as you have been told, wherever you may be. Confidence and cool heads are what all of us are going to need for the next few days. Pass this on to the cook. Don't tell her where you are going tomorrow. Just go, and leave her guessing."

"Yes, Mr. Jones."

"O. K. Now I must telephone. Goodnight, Cleo."

"Goodnight, Mr. Jones."

In the doctor's private laboratory, Jones picked up the receiver and softly asked for a long distance number. When he got it, he asked for the Chief of Staff.

"Your number and station, please?"

"Eight-seven-J, calling from Dr. Klaup's residence."

"Thank you."

Jones' message was short. "He's ripe. Pick him up at his house tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. That's all."

## CHAPTER VI

### SICKLES AND PANCAKES

THE THREE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED will never be forgotten by those who lived through them. To say that the people were infuriated is putting the fact much too mildly. They hated the enemy in their midst, of course. But they hated their own generals more. What was the sense of these stupid hourly broadcasts, all monotonously alike, encouraging the civilians to hold their morale high when the most cheerful felt so low they could look an ant in the face? "We have the situation well in hand." — "Our troops are taking up prepared positions in the rear according to a prearranged plan." — "The action is developing favorably in accordance with the plans of the general staff." — "The airforce has executed a strategic retreat to the north without the loss of a single plane." — "The withdrawal from —" all the strategically vital areas on the map — "was carried out in good order, with only the loss of certain supplies."

Retreat, retreat, retreat. What did the generals think they were doing? Conducting a colossal expedition to the North Pole? The Chief Executive's message of reassurance was, if anything, more fatuous than the cheerios of the Chief of Staff. "We have met the enemy and he is ours," concluded one of the most remarkable broadcasts in the annals of democracy. There has been no estimate of the number of radios smashed by their enraged owners as those historic words oozed from the ether, but it must have been considerable. No wonder there were reported mutterings of mutiny in the armed forces and threats of impeachment for the Chief Executive. If the generals and the politicians couldn't run a war, pitch them out on their ears and put in men who could.

A sober, two-sentence broadcast at midnight of the third day of the invasion suddenly turned rational pessimism into irrational optimism. Mobs are like that. "Keep your nerves. The military authorities know exactly what they are doing." It was the Surgeon General speaking, and it was his maiden effort on the air. Not having heard him before, and not being very clear about his identity, except that he must be a doctor of some kind, the people believed him.

Meanwhile the fussily efficient enemy seemed to be everywhere. His trained robots took over all civic functions from the police to the schools. The new order was no longer a promise of the future; it had arrived. With amazing efficiency the victors began pigeon-holing the vanquished. If at the end of six weeks each individual in the nation did not know his exact duties and privileges — or lack of them — in the reorganized state, it would not be the fault of the organizers. Then it would be just too bad for the laggard. They might, if they felt like it, prod him gently to remind him of his altered status. But more likely they would save time by separating him from any status whatever.

There had been very little actual warfare of the noisy kind. Fear and the naked display of overwhelming force rendered bombs and bullets all but superfluous. Only where some particularly obstinate community persisted in its stupidity did the planes drop a few sticks of bombs to educate the people. A shattered city hall and a dozen gas tanks flaming beyond control usually sufficed, especially when the more obtuse victims grasped the fact that their own airforce had executed a brilliant strategic retreat to the north. More stubborn cases resisted — without benefit of military support — till the business districts of their respective ant hills had been reduced to rubble. "Casualties," according to the general staff were, in most instances, "not as great as might have been anticipated," which was a lukewarm sort of comfort for the next of kin of the casualties. Still, it was a comfort.

All this time the nation's Capital had enjoyed complete immunity from attack, and even from threats. What could this singular exception mean? According to one aggressive faction of civilian hotheads, it could only mean that the government had sold out to the enemy. This faction advocated an immediate march on the Capital, to seize and hang the Chief Executive, his cabinet, and all elected officers of the government, together with such officers of the army and air force as had not wisely run away to safety.

Attractive as this project was to many, it failed of realization for a very simple reason. How were all the amateur hangmen ever to get to the Capital when the only means of transportation left them by the enemy were their legs? Even walking any distance was an idle dream. The enemy sentries blocked all roads and encouraged disgruntled civilians to stay close to home and mind their own business. What might have been impressive action evaporated in talk.

The simple fact was that the Capital had not been molested by the enemy because the famous propagandist of vitamin omega, Dr. Klaup, was a guest of the government and residing in the Capital. The public at large was unaware of this interesting fact. Indeed it was known only to the general staff, the Chief Executive, Mr. Jones, and Cleo. The Surgeon General and Colonel Gregory had been invited to join the general staff for the time being; Cleo had not. To keep her from being bored, an intimate friend of the Chief Executive's cook took her shopping in the mornings, sight seeing in the afternoons, and to a double-header movie in the evenings — the tourist's ideal day, after which Cleo was willing to retire.

The famous Dr. Klaup spent his progressively fewer waking hours in elaborate conferences, more or less bogus, with Jones and members of the staff on critical details of the vitamin program. He had been called to the capital for that very purpose. Obviously, the Surgeon General declared, vitamins would become of increasingly greater national importance with the conclusion of hostilities. Klaup, who had assumed a somewhat obnoxious bumptiousness as the enemy continued to pile conquest on conquest, agreed heartily — when he was fully awake. Colonel Gregory suspected him of dreaming dreams and seeing visions of himself as the right-hand man of the future dictator, laying down the

law on food and drink, and wallowing in the loot of the fattest victory of modern times.

So irritating was the famous biochemist's bland superiority and lofty condescension that the Chief of Staff had to exercise all his self control to refrain from telling Klaup the truth prematurely. Klaup was in fact a prisoner of war, and indeed a prisoner of a highly valuable kind. He was a hostage for the safety of the Capital.

Although Klaup himself was unaware that he was being detained for military reasons, the enemy had been kept informed of Klaup's general whereabouts from the moment he landed in the Capital. By radio messages in the enemy's own most secret code, Gregory's men had reported the detention of Dr. Klaup directly to enemy headquarters, where the Komizahr himself was leading his invincibles to victory. "If you bomb or shell our capital," the messages concluded, "you will probably kill Dr. Klaup. All arrangements have been made to transfer him immediately to the zone of greatest danger should the capital be attacked." The Komizahr roared and bellowed like a trapped bear, but that was all the good it did him.

"Give him a day or two more to work himself up to a real tantrum," Jones prophesied, "and he will attack."

"Yes," the Chief of Staff agreed, "I recognize the symptoms. But it will be pretty disgraceful for us if he attacks even two days too soon."

"Don't forget our own air force," the Chief Executive interposed.

"Oh, as far as that goes, we could give him a good fight. But what would be the point of that? The battle would be fought right over the Capital. The result would be worse than if we had surrendered unconditionally in the first place."

"Then what do you propose to do, provided the attack comes before we are ready?"

"Stick to the strategy we agreed upon."

"And surrender unconditionally?"

"Exactly."

"Appeaser!" the Chief Executive mocked.

"Smile, when you call me that," the Chief of Staff quoted.

"All right. I'm smiling — the smile that won me the last four elections. You agree, Mr. Jones?"

"With the smile, yes."

What was to become the nation's greatest feast day dawned blue and cloudless over an angry, conquered people. 'Sickle and pancake day,' as the holiday was christened spontaneously by at least five persons fifteen hours after that spacious dawn, began as peacefully as any day in the simple annals of a peace loving nation.

The devilry began half an hour after sunrise, with a thick blizzard of leaflets dropped from the serene skies. A full two-thirds of the enemy's air force buzzed from city to city as busily as bees on a summer morning, dumping their cargoes of terrifying literature on a panicky population. The remaining planes of the enemy's grand fleet were far up north, standing by to aid the mechanized armies to repress any ill-advised attempt at a counter attack. They need scarcely have been so cautious; the forces of the last considerable democracy in an undemocratic

world were still, apparently, trying to beat the record to the North Pole.

A few desperately determined optimists ignored the leaflets. They professed to see the general staff's grand strategy emerging slowly but clearly from the continued "strategic withdrawals to prepared positions in the north." It was to be another retreat from Moscow. Like Napoleon's Grand Army, the enemy would presently find himself pursuing an elusive foe, who steadfastly refused to accept battle, over the frozen wastes of the Arctic. Then he would freeze to death. The 'prepared' in "prepared positions" was a military disguise for 'winter clothing' which, presumably, the enemy lacked. The rest of the population refused to be bequiled by such pleasing fantasies. They picked up the enemy's leaflets and read them, carefully.

Silently digesting the message from the skies, they learned that the Komizahr's patience was exhausted. He personally was coming, that very day, to demand the unconditional surrender of the stupid and inefficient democracy which persisted in useless resistance to his indomitable will. Beginning at ten o'clock sharp, his first, second, and third battle fleets of the air would demonstrate over the nation's Capital. If resistance was encountered, the capital would be atom blasted forthwith off the face of the earth. If, seeing the folly of resistance, the vanquished nation offered none, the Komizahr would graciously spare the Capital, on two conditions.

First, the nation's Chief Executive in person, as Commander in Chief of the democratic forces would receive the Komizahr at the Capital's principal airdrome, where the Komizahr would land at twelve o'clock sharp, and tender the unconditional surrender of his nation.

Second, the great biochemist, Dr. Klaup, whose genius had now assured world domination for his friends, must suffer no harm. If so much as a hair of his head was turned — the leaflets had it that way — the Capital would be destroyed.

To make sure that his ultimatum reached everybody, the Komizahr had it transmitted by all radio frequencies his technicians could think of. The Chief Executive and his advisers were in conference when the broadcast began. An excited secretary dashed in and hustled them out where they could listen to the radio.

"What time have you?" the Chief Executive asked Jones, glancing at his watch. "I suppose he means ten o'clock our time for the show to begin."

"Mine says nine fifty-seven."

"Three minutes to get to the roof. Come on, boys. This is going to be the show of our lives."

They followed him, crowding into the elevator with whoops of laughter.

"The Komizahr is falling into it himself. Down, down — no! not you — we're going up, to the roof," as the elevator boy, naturally enough, began to descend.

"Where's Klaup?" somebody asked.

"In bed," Jones reported. "He probably won't get up till noon today."

"Too bad he's missing this. He's not likely to hear the radio and get up, is he?"

"Not Klaup. He's dead to the world."

They scrambled out on the broad flat roof. "Look! There they come, thousands of them. Ah — the show begins."

For two thrilling hours the first, second, and third battle fleets of the enemy did their stuff over the amazed and fascinated Capital. Even the most hostile spectator acknowledged that, for brilliant acrobatics and mechanical precision the air circus was almost beyond belief. A single theme motivated the intricate evolutions. Units of eight planes flying in perfectly coordinated formation made up the basic elements from which the whole gigantic pattern took dynamic shape. Each unit of eight maintained the figure of the enemy's industrious seriousness as it flew. According to the Chief Executive, the effect was that of a sickle skittering across the sky. Eight of these basic or elementary sickles made up a unit of the second order, again a sickle. Eight sickles of the second order combined to form a sickle of the third order containing a total of 512 closely packed sickelized planes. Sickles of the fourth order resulted from the union, sicklewise, of eight sickles of the third order, resulting in a total sickelization of 4096 planes. Finally, a single super-sickle of the fifth order, totaling 32768 planes tied the whole gigantic pattern tightly together into a five-fold knotted knot of sickles.

So much for the mere geometric or static aspects of the circus. It was the dynamics of the pattern that gave the show its truly unforgettable appeal. As they flew, sickles of the first order — those containing only eight planes in each — gyrated clockwise; sickles of the second order, 64 planes each, gyrated counter-clockwise; third order sickles, 512 planes apiece, gyrated clockwise; those of the fourth order, each of 4096 planes, gyrated counter-clockwise; and finally, the super-sickle of the fifth order, 32768 planes, gyrated clockwise. After one complete gyration, each of the units reversed its direction of rotation.

The effect was bewildering in the extreme, with a heady, hypnotic fascination. As the spectators followed the twistings and turnings of vortices within vortices, they gradually lost their ability to see straight or to think coherently. Like everything the super-efficient enemy did, the circus had a very definite practical purpose. It was designed to do exactly what it was doing to the crowds staring up open-mouthed at it from packed streets and jammed parks, from swarming rooftops and from top-storey windows. Two hours of it and they would be completely sickelized, incapable of independent action and drunker than if they had been swilling a potent beer the whole morning long.

"I'm getting fuddled," the Chief Executive confessed after forty minutes. "This is no joke. Look at that filthy mess up there. It's like an infinite basin of squirming earthworms. I've had enough. Anybody coming down with me?"

They all joined him. In the elevator, Jones remarked that the marvelous exhibition of flying they had witnessed, however disgusting it might be, was in itself conclusive proof that the enemy aviators had been primed for months with vitamins.

"Our own boys couldn't have put on a better circus," the Chief of Staff agreed. "That show alone is enough to hang Klaup."

"Hanging's too good for him," the Chief Executive exclaimed with



considerable passion. "My head feels like that basin. What Klaup needs is a well placed kick in the pants."

"Don't forget your date with the Komizahr at twelve sharp," the Chief of Staff reminded him.

He groaned. "I'm not forgetting it. Now I've got to go and squeeze into my monkey clothes. Commander in Chief — bah! Why can't you soldiers dress like human beings? There must be thirty pounds of gold braid on that idiotic outfit of mine. And the hat — all mucked up with ostrich feathers like a light woman's of the 'nineties. I've got a good mind to go naked." He glared at his Chief of Staff. "Did anybody find that toy sword I'm supposed to carry?"

"The orderly laid it out with your uniform."

"I'll lay him out. Wait for me here, and we'll all go together."

When he finally emerged from his dressing room, resplendent in gold braid and feathers, they rose and saluted. Strange to say, the antiquated uniform did not look ridiculous, nor did the gold-hilted sword in its gleaming scabbard seem inappropriate in an age of atomic explosives. The sheer illogic of the dazzling outfit somehow epitomized the martial spirit more fittingly than could a khaki uniform, tin hat, and hand grenade.

"Come on," he snapped, ignoring the salutes. "If we're to be on time we must hurry. What's the matter with you, Jones? Aren't you coming with us?"

"No, thanks. I must stick around to keep Klaup amused and ignorant."

"Good idea. See you later."

They arrived at the landing field at two minutes to twelve. The show overhead was still squirming away at its dizziest. At exactly one minute to twelve a startling change in the aspect of the turbulent heavens made the spectators gasp as if they had suddenly stepped into the middle of Judgment Day. Each of the 32768 planes emitted two long streams of crimson smoke. Instantly the seething bowl of the sky was hidden from view in swirling clouds of what appeared to be fire. Blood-red face questioned blood-red face in silent terror. Was this the beginning of the end? Not quite.

A single gigantic plane burst through the flaming vault and spiralled slowly down to the landing field, dropping blinding white flares as it came.

"The Komizahr descends," the Chief of Staff announced.

The Chief Executive was following the proceedings with distaste. His comment probably summed up the unexpressed sentiments of the others.

"Apocalyptic sort of ass, isn't he?"

"If that fool pilot doesn't let down his landing gear pretty soon," Colonel Gregory remarked, "there's going to be an accident. Then there will be real hell to pay. What's the matter with him? Why doesn't he —. Look at that! A perfect pancake!"

They hurried to the scene of the mishap. The huge plane, tricked out in lacquered emblems enough to paint a hotel, rested ignominiously on its belly. Just as they reached the plane the door burst open and the pilot fell out. Getting to his feet, he began reeling drunkenly round the

plane. A very angry but unimpressive little man, with a square face like a cat's, stood in the gaping entrance gesticulating like an enraged jumping jack.

"He wants the steps, I suppose," the Chief Executive observed. "Too much fuss for a little delay like that. Here they come."

The Komizahr descended the steps three at a time. They thought he was eager to consummate his conquest. But no, he had more immediate business. Chasing the reeling pilot, he quickly overtook him, jumped up and down in front of the man, and bellowed a command. The robot instantly clicked to attention. Composing himself, the Komizahr marched to the rear of the immobilized pilot, measured his distance carefully, advanced, and delivered a vigorous kick. The man executed a right-about-face, saluted and, at a sharp order, lumbered off.

The dignity of the occasion being thus restored, the Komizahr spat, saluted, and bowed stiffly to the Chief Executive. The bow was returned. A roar from the Komizahr brought his interpreter tumbling out of the plane. Wasting no time, the conqueror began rattling away like a machine gun. What he said was as direct and as rapidly delivered as a clip of shells. Its gist, as interpreted, was unconditional surrender or annihilation. Preferring the former, the Chief Executive stepped two paces forward, bowed stiffly and tendered his sword, hilt first. The Komizahr seized the weapon, whirled it three times round his head in the lurid light, saluted with it, and returned it, hilt first, to the Chief Executive. Thus for the second time in less than three minutes, the Komizahr demonstrated that, all slanders to the contrary, he understood the niceties of military etiquette. Bowing slightly, the Chief Executive accepted the sword.

"All is lost but honor," he remarked to nobody in particular.

A bellow from the Komizahr signified that he desired a translation. When he understood the remark he was deeply and favorably impressed. He saluted twice. The salutes were returned.

With a glance at the fireworks overhead, the Komizahr put the second proviso of his ultimatum through the interpreter. Was Dr. Klaup whole and sound? On being assured that he was, the Komizahr shouted an order in the direction of his pancaked plane. The radio operator was evidently aboard and functioning, for instantly the air circus stopped spurting crimson smoke and swiftly, methodically, began de-sickelizing itself. The interpreter explained that the Komizahr had graciously ordered his thunder and fire birds to return to their roosts. He added significantly that ample forces remained within thirty minutes of the Capital should any misunderstanding arise. Moreover, the Capital itself was plentifully supplied with loyal fifth columnists.

"We knew that," Colonel Gregory remarked. "You needn't bother to translate."

The Chief Executive was in some doubt as to his duties under the new order. Nor were his social obligations very clear. Was he the host, or was the Komizahr? His doubts were resolved by a sharp command. The Komizahr wished to be led at once to his great admirer and able ally, Dr. Klaup.

The scene in the Chief Executive's study will doubtless be immortalized in the new murals ordered for the Hall of Justice. They will show the

Komizahr saluting Klaup as the latter advances with his right arm extended upward at an angle of 37 degrees. But they will not show the immediately following action which melted the famous biochemist to tears. Almost before he knew what was happening, Klaup found an enormous gold sickle pinned securely to his vest just above his diaphragm. It was the highest honor in the Komizahr's power to bestow, and it had been pinned where it now reposed by the Komizahr's own fingers. The interpreter informed them that the words accompanying the decoration meant "To Dr. Klaup, greatest biochemist of the century, synthesizer of vitamin omega, true patriot, fortifier and revitalizer of the true Democracy's faltering armies and fainting spirits."

"We knew that too," Colonel Gregory muttered. The interpreter did not hear him.

Klaup, to give him whatever credit he may deserve, looked somewhat ashamed. He mumbled something to the Komizahr in his own language. The Komizahr's face cracked into an almost genial smile. Hastily rummaging in the side pockets of his tunic, he found what he needed. From a handful of sickles of the same design as Klaup's but of lesser magnitudes and of assorted brightnesses, he selected one that might have been either silver or pewter. Jones was taken completely aback. The decoration was intended for him.

"Any assistant of Klaup's is an assistant of mine," is the literal translation of what the Komizahr asserted as he pinned Jones to the sickle.

The roar of laughter which followed this impromptu performance broke the ice. Even the Komizahr, after a few perfunctory cackles, found himself joining heartily in the laugh at Jones' expense, although he could not possibly have said why. They were all good friends now. Excellent; a friend's pocket is the easiest thing in the world to dip one's hand into. Klaup seized the moment to make himself solid with everybody.

Addressing the Chief Executive in an oration which he had evidently memorized and which the interpreter murmured a sentence at a time into the Komizahr's ear, Klaup explained in detail that he was no traitor but the savior of his adopted country. By making it possible for the Champions of Democracy to subdue the land of his adoption, he had done the country the greatest favor in human power to confer. Almost without bloodshed and with only negligible destruction of property, his adopted country had been lifted in less than a week from the barbarism of free enterprise to the planned culture of the new order. For this he deserved, and doubtless would receive, not reproaches, but the heartfelt thanks of the erstwhile Chief Executive and of all who formerly were citizens of the now defunct plutocracy.

It was Klaup's inestimable privilege to have made this all but bloodless victory possible. Six months ago, he declared, his friends' armies south of the border were rapidly degenerating in physique and morale for lack of certain essential chemicals in their rations. Of what avail would all their superb mechanical equipment be if the warriors were unfit for battle? Yet the conversion of the last considerable plutocracy to resist the onrushing wave of the future had been ordered for six months ahead. The Komizahr himself, trusting as always to his perfect sense of timing, had discerned the propitious date where his generals saw only a confusion

of dark days and moonless nights. How could the Komizahr have foreseen that six months would suffice to transform a dispirited army, suffering the debilitating consequences of malnutrition, into the most efficient fighting unit in military history?

At this point in his oration, Klaup paused for a moment while the Chief of Staff listened attentively to an orderly who entered quietly and whispered a message.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized, noticing Klaup's pointed silence. "My orderly has just reported that the arrangements for the banquet to the Komizahr are complete. If you and the Komizahr will excuse me for a moment, I should like to check the wines."

When this had been translated to him, the Komizahr nodded his consent. The Chief of Staff slipped from the room and hurried to his office. Locking the door behind him, he reached for the telephone.

"Number one speaking. Transmit these orders to all in command. Attack at once on all fronts. Resistance will be negligible. Pursue the enemy's airforce to its home bases. Destroy all bases and other military establishments of the enemy. Destroy all his equipment. Prisoners may be left where they are till further orders. That is all. Repeat." He listened while the orders were read back to him. "Check."

On rejoining the audience in the Chief Executive's study, he heard Klaup explaining in detail how he had saved the day for his compatriots by imparting to them the process of synthesizing vitamin omega.

"From the experiments which my assistant and I performed on rabbits and guinea pigs, and from my own more precise treatment of white rats, I calculated the exact daily dosage of vitamin omega required to bring the fighting forces to their maximum efficiency in six months. By an inadvertance for which I cannot now account, I confided the outcome of my experiments to Mr. Jones. He, I believe, seriously considered divulging this confidential information to the military authorities of his government. I saw my chance to outwit him. I myself would inform the authorities. Not only that, I would cooperate with them in every way to put into effect a six-months vitamin omega program. In this way I could allay any suspicion that might arise, should reports of the Komizahr's vitamin campaign reach improper ears.

"You say this was a dangerous course to pursue? Not at all. The superiority of the Komizahr's forces in men and equipment would be maintained and even enhanced. No amount of vitamin fortification could make up in six months for five years of plutocratic incompetence and inefficiency. This strategy, I believe, had the Komizahr's approval."

The Komizahr himself signified by alternate clapping and saluting that Klaup's strategy had enjoyed his approval. Through the interpreter he intimated that a few words from Dr. Klaup's decorated assistant, Mr. Jones, would be acceptable on this happy and historic occasion.

"How about it?" Jones asked the Chief of Staff.

"Shoot."

"O. K. Gentlemen. On our way to the banquet hall, it will be my pleasure to show you the outcome of certain experiments on which Major Evans and I have been engaged for the past sixteen months. Ten months longer, please note; than the time interval so frequently mentioned by Dr.

Klaup. It was those ten months that induced the government of our inefficient and incompetent state to put into effect the program of vitamin fortification which I, as Dr. Klaup's assistant, felt it my privilege to recommend. Never mind why. It's a long story, and you're all hungry. Most of you know it already anyhow.

"Before we file out and leave this historic occasion, as the Komizahr might say, to history, I want to congratulate Dr. Klaup on his speech. In my opinion it beats the spots off Marc Antony's. Again never mind why. If you don't see it now you will shortly. And let me say in concluding my own oration that you, Dr. Klaup, would never have made that speech if I had not slipped a couple of vitamin pills into your eleven o'clock coffee. But for those pills you would have gone to sleep on your feet before you could open your mouth."

Proud of his recognition of at least one word in English, the Komizahr shouted a question.

"Omega?"

"No. Alpha. Come on; the pig's roasted and the pudding's boiled. The cook will be getting anxious."

THROUGH HIS INTERPRETER THE KOMIZAHR inquired where they were going, as he and the Chief Executive climbed into the luxurious limousine which was to whisk them to the victory banquet.

"The army hospital first. We shall take a stroll through it before proceeding to the banquet hall. The hall is just south of the hospital."

Perhaps not unnaturally the Komizahr instantly became suspicious. He demanded the reason for this somewhat macabre itinerary.

"We thought you might wish to confer decorations on some of your men. The sick are being taken care of here."

The Komizahr expressed his appreciation of this military courtesy and began fishing in his pockets for sickles. He was still sorting out the various sizes when they reached the hospital. The Surgeon General took charge of the party.

"First let me explain how the incapacitated of your army of occupation happen to be here instead of in hospitals nearer the places where they were picked up. I may say that only non-combatants — police officers, economists, engineers, teachers, scientists, and others of the various bureaus of reorganization — have been collected. If any of the actual troops are in need of medical attention, they are doubtless being treated in your own field hospitals. But no provision seemed to have been made for any of your civil servants who might collapse from overwork or from other causes. To assure the proper treatment of such cases, I ordered the Boy Aids to keep close watch on all civil servants and put them on trains, with qualified attendants, at the earliest possible moment, for shipment here.

"This is the only hospital in the country where these cases can be scientifically observed and properly treated. The attendants, you may be interested to learn, were selected from the finest body of young women in the country, our Fireside Girls. They were ordered to use every means possible, short of sororizing with the enemy, to make their charges comfortable. Is everything clear?"

Apparently it was, for the Komizahr promptly pinned a gold sickle, about half the size of Klaup's, on the Surgeon General's chest. The party filed into the first ward.

"These are the most recent cases. This man," the Surgeon General indicated a pasty-faced lummoX fast asleep on the cot nearest the door, "was brought in only an hour ago."

The Komizahr stared at the man's face as if he were seeing something in a nightmare. Klaup joined him. They began chattering excitedly in their own language.

"The Komizahr says," Klaup informed them, "that this man is the pilot of his private plane."

"Check," said the Chief of Staff. "Your Komizahr kicked him in the pants this morning."

"Is he seriously injured?"

The Surgeon General read from the chart hanging at the foot of the cot. Beyond a technical and unenlightening record of bruises, there was nothing further than the cryptic notation 'stage one.' The Komizahr asked what stage one meant.

"That can be best explained after you have seen patients in later stages. Shall we move on?"

The inspection lasted over an hour. It ended somewhat dramatically. Throwing open the door of a small, airy room with heavily barred windows, the Surgeon General invited the Komizahr and Klaup to enter. They did so, rather doubtfully. What they had seen appeared to have upset them. Two cots and a chair were the only furniture in the room. At the foot of each cot hung the regulation chart. The Surgeon General indicated that his guests might be interested in these charts. The Komizahr peered closely at one, Klaup at the other. Then they straightened up and exchanged stares. The line for the patient's name on one of the charts signified that Dr. Klaup was to occupy the corresponding cot. The other was being reserved for the Komizahr. Klaup said nothing. The Komizahr began to bellow.

"What is he saying?" the Surgeon General asked.

"He says he will have the lot of you shot for this insult."

"Oh no, he won't," the Chief of Staff reported. "Tell him these facts from me. He saw the orderly hand me a radiogram five minutes ago. This is the news. The Komizahr's outfit is being rolled up everywhere. His first, second, and third air fleets are pancaking at the rate of twenty bombers a minute all over the plains just north of the border. Most of them are coming down fairly gently. The others are getting pretty badly banged up. The majority of the pilots are in the same condition as that fellow your Komizahr kicked. Some are as far gone already as stage three."

"And tell him also that his efficient fifth columnists, here in the capital and all over the country, are being carted off like so much firewood to the prison camps prepared for them six months ago. The Boy Aids are rolling them in by the thousands. There is as yet no detailed report on your armies, but the story there must be pretty much the same. And just one last thing. Tell him that if he had been more than half awake when he landed, he wouldn't have come here without his personal body

guard. Not that they would have made any real difference. By now they would probably be as far along as the fifth columnists your Komizahr evidently thought would protect him."

For the first time in his triumphal career the Komizahr was beyond bellowing. But he was not beyond action. What he had seen and heard left no doubt in his mind that he had been tricked. He was now a prisoner of his enemies. It was not yet clear to him how this disaster had come about; the shocking fact was enough for the moment. A scapegoat must be found. As Klaup was his only fellow countryman in the room, the Komizahr quickly solved his problem. Stepping behind the unsuspecting and drowsy biochemist, the Komizahr halted, took careful aim, and kicked Klaup squarely in the seat of his pants.

"Thanks," said the Chief Executive, "I've been wanting that done for days."

"Anyhow," Jones remarked, "it woke him up. Shall I enlighten them? O.K., I'll make it as short as I can." He addressed Klaup. "You never understood any more about vitamins than that chair does. You were and are the punkest excuse for a biochemist that ever tried to hold a fourth-rate job. If you had had any brains at all, you would have seen what the experiments with rabbits and guinea pigs meant. And you wouldn't have stopped there, if you have ever seriously thought of possible consequences of dosing human beings with synthetic vitamins. You would have tried out your stuff on human controls, as I talked the army into doing ten months before you signed your contract with the government for omega. If you had had even that much elementary scientific sense, you and your crazy Komizahr wouldn't be in the jam you are in now.

"But what did you actually do? Like the gullible chump you are, you took my say-so that vitamin omega was the proper dope. And what did I do? I primed you to spill the priceless secret to your fat-headed friends south of the border. It was a natural. You fell for it because you thought I wouldn't dream of lying to you, and because you believed your friends should rule the world. You just told us all about it yourself. And didn't you think you were smart! A second Machiavelli or another Peter the Bumpkin.

"But dumb as you are, your high-powered Komizahr is a hundred times dumber. Any competent biochemist would have made all the tests I made. What did your Komizahr's bright boys do? They took your word for everything. Why? Because they weren't so bright after all. And the reason for that is very simple. Your Komizahr had shot all the reputable scientists he hadn't locked up in concentration camps. Politicians make rotten scientists.

"If you had known the first thing about omega, omega would have been the last thing you would have prescribed as a substitute for natural vitamins.

"Depending on the daily dosage, it acts as you thought it should, but only up to a certain point. The stuff is a powerful drug. It is a heavy sedative with a cumulative action.

"By regulating the amount ingested daily, it is easy to bring on drowsiness, lack of will power, fuzzy coordination, accumulation of water in the tissues, and finally coma and muscular degeneration, in any pre-

assigned time. Properly dosed, the subject is full of energy and initiative up to the time determined by the amount of the dose. Then, when he feels sure he is on top of the world for keeps, the cumulative soporific effect hits the back of his head like a sledge hammer and he falls off, fast asleep. Instead of being the super-intelligent strong man he thought omega was making him, he is just a three-hundred-pound nincompoop with no brains. The daily dosage I told you was as right for six months as I could figure it. This is what your crowd got.

"What did our men get? If you haven't guessed it by now, when it is six months too late to do you any good, you are dumber than even I thought you were. Our fellows got vitamin alpha. No ill effects, now or later, from that. Alpha does everything you thought omega would do, and keeps on doing it indefinitely. Here, before I forget it, sign this. It's a deed of gift to me of the laboratories and business you swindled me out of. You probably haven't any civil rights left, but I'm taking no chances. If your property is forfeited the government has promised it all to me. Hurry up; you're more than half asleep already."

Klaup signed in a daze. It was clear that he did not know exactly what was going on. He gazed longingly at his cot.

"Before I take a nap," he faltered, "will you please tell me what you did with all the vitamin omega I shipped to army headquarters?"

"Sure I'll tell you. We dumped it all into the sewers to put the rats to sleep. As Major Evans may tell you some day when you wake up, the government factories turned out all the vitamin alpha we needed. Then we slapped your labels on the containers and shipped the stuff out. Simple, wasn't it? Every spy in the country kept your Komizahr thoroughly misinformed. Here" — he grabbed Klaup as he lurched toward the cot — "don't lie down yet. There's a banquet coming up, with all your favorite dishes. Your shot of alpha will keep you going till the fun's over."

Slumped down on his cot, his head in his hands, the Komizahr grunted something that sounded complimentary. Translated, it was one soldier's acknowledgement of another's efficiency.

"Tell him," the Chief of Staff replied, "his presence here is not my doing. His capture in this country was not part of the original plan at all. But when he broadcast notice of his personal appearance, we naturally got his bed ready. I believe the Surgeon General has a few words for the Komizahr."

"Yes, but nothing of much importance now. Those convalescents you saw in the hospital were the controls Mr. Jones used to check the rate of action of omega. I would judge you, Mr. Komizahr, to be passing into stage six. Tomorrow you will probably be as Dr. Klaup was this morning before Mr. Jones administered alpha — without the doctor's consent, of course. So you two will make a very congenial pair, omegally speaking. That is one of the reasons we are putting you in the same cell. You can guess the other."

The Komizahr said nothing. But Klaup burst out in angry protest.

"You can't put me in with him! I never had any omega —."

"Oh, didn't you?" Jones mocked. "Cleo gave you a pill every



morning in your coffee — except once when she slipped and stuffed a pig with pills."

"Black Goldfish did that?"

"She did. Under my direction. You see, we hardly hoped you would make as complete a fool of yourself as you did this morning, and give yourself away the first chance you got. And certainly we never foresaw that your Komizahr would descend in all his glory to decorate and damn you at the same time. That was just a gift from Heaven. So I prescribed the regular daily dose of omega for you. We thought you might be tempted to catch an enemy plane returning home when the invasion started. Then, if you were not vitaminized you would have sense enough to get off this continent somehow. But properly doped, you would fold up as all your buddies south of the border are folding up now. Then we would roll you in with the rest and dump you in a prison camp. For personal reasons, Klaup, I didn't want to see you get away. Neither did the government, as should be plain even to your addled brains. Come on, let's eat."

The banquet hall, only a step or two from the hospital, turned out to be the nurses' mess room. All the tables but one had been shoved back against the walls. The central table alone was laid for a meal. Except for the centerpiece the layout was what the nurses saw three times a day. In the center of the table an imposing pyramid of gold coins, 1250 of them, awaited their recipient. She entered, by the service door. Clad in a skin-tight creation of gold and black sequins, she undulated languidly toward them with an indescribably graceful motion between a sidle and a swim.

"Black Goldfish!" Klaup gasped. "Did you put pills in my coffee?"

"Yes, sir."

"And in my stuffed pig once?"

"Yes, sir."

"But why —"

Further cross-examination was curtailed by an uproar at the foot of the table. The Komizahr was bellowing his head off; the interpreter was translating the bellows nineteen to the dozen; the Chief Executive and Colonel Gregory, ably assisted by Jones, were wrestling desperately with the infuriated Komizahr in a futile endeavor to flatten him on the floor, while the Surgeon General kept bawling "orderlies, orderlies!"

Strong-armed help arrived just as the Komizahr crashed to the floor, upsetting the table in his downfall. Glassware, crockery, cutlery and 1250 gold coins were scattered to the four corners of the room as the orderlies, experts at their job, disentangled four pairs of arms from four pairs of legs.

The spectacle of all this golden ruin and the excitement of the free-for-all with no clinches barred, released all of Cleo's dammed-up inhibitions in an exhibition of savage dancing that would have done credit to a jungle queen. Capering her cancan round, the fallen mighty, she let out whoop after whoop of pure ecstasy, every sequin of her costume flashing and her scarlet underskirt and yellow undies flickering here and there like a summer fire in dry grass. It was her party, and she was

going to celebrate the way she liked whether the white folk approved or not.

"Order, silence!" the Chief of Staff roared. The famous bellow that could be heard from one end of the parade ground to the other so startled them all, including Cleo, that peace descended instantly.

"What's it all about?"

"The Komizahr," the Chief Executive panted, jerking off his tattered tie, "refuses to stay in the same room with one of the opposite sex." He turned to the interpreter. "You said sex, didn't you?"

"No, no. I said color."

"I beg your pardon. But as your Komizahr is to sit at the left hand of the lady who has just entertained us, I fear he will have to overcome his racial prejudices. Our country is a democracy, you know. Being the only one of her sex present, the lady will sit at the foot of the table, opposite me. Dr. Klaup will sit at the lady's right. The others will seat themselves. That is, as soon as the table is reset."

When this was translated to him, the Komizahr crimsoned and muttered a guttural reply, which the interpreter rendered in English: "You can shoot me before I will sit at a table with her. I am not a democrat."

As nobody wanted to shoot him, the Chief of Staff suggested a compromise. If the Komizahr would pick up all the gold coins and put them in the pan to be provided, they would rescind the Chief Executive's order. After lengthy consultation with Klaup and the interpreter, the Komizahr accepted the ultimatum, on condition that Klaup be allowed to help him. This compromise was accepted.

Klaup did most of the work, the Komizahr proving himself the genius at organization and leadership which legend made him. When the last coin had rattled into the pan, the Chief of Staff issued an order.

"Pick up the pan," he directed the Komizahr, "and present it to the lady with the compliments of the Chief Executive."

It was too much. Burying his face in his hands, the Komizahr burst into tears.

"Oh, the poor man!" Cleo exclaimed, darting forward and hefting the pan herself. "See, I can lift it. I don't need anybody's help. And thank you all, ever so much. And I would really much rather have dinner in the kitchen with cook."

She made off toward the kitchen with her reward.

"Cleo!" Jones called after her. "Wait a minute. Here, I'll hold the pan." He took it from her. "Now call Dr. Klaup anything you like."

She glanced at Klaup's defeated, haggard face and hung her head.

"I don't want to call him anything."

Jones handed her back the pan and she disappeared into the kitchen.

# CRUSADER

BY GENE ELLERMAN

THE DESERTS OF AFRIC FADED AWAY ABOUT THE WIND-CARVED BLACK ruins of the mystery city, stretching ever outward toward the rounded rim of that utter desolation—where burning rock and sand fused with the blazing heavens. The city lay as dead and deserted as it had lain for countless centuries beneath the shifting sands of the Sahara before the storm of a week ago ripped its concealing shroud of sand away.

Allan Allan, giant young crusader from the damp green shores of far-off England, crawled to the uppermost pinnacle of the exposed ruins and stared hopelessly out over that lifeless sea of blistering sand waves. Alone he was, the last of his ten comrades lying somewhere out there in that arid wasteland. This city had been his last hope as he fought thirst and heat across the outer levels to its massive low walls. Now hope was dead.

Allan Allan tore the helmet from his blackened head and snarled defiantly up into the blazing thirsty sunlight. Sounds, mumbling and broken, issued from his cracked dry lips as he cursed Allah, Mohammed, and all the sons of the Prophet. Suddenly he was silent.

"Satanus!" he moaned as he saw grotesquely shaped monsters chiseled deep into the tower walls beside him. "Creatures of the Beast!"

Weird monsters with the legs of many-bodied serpents about their ovoid torsos stared from malignant multi-gemmed eyes down at this barbarian interloper. Strange monsters, winged and scaly, were depicted there, and among them Allan Allan beheld the brutish shapes of strange half-men bearing clubs. He saw creatures more terrible than the mind of man could have conceived; dragons, serpents, and spear-maned, ungainly lizard-things that could never have existed.

Shuddering he turned away and stumbled toward a low black doorway in the tower wall. Low it was, three feet in height and twice as wide. He dropped to his knees and crept inward, out of the terrible blast of the tropic sun. With night he would venture out once again.

And then his groping hand found the massive hollow circle of a metal ring, an armlet. He held it to the light, and as he did so all the graven monsters on the walls seemed to rustle and whisper together in warning. Allan Allan's fingers tightened and he swayed unsteadily to his knees. A squat-bodied thing of stone, many-tentacled and hideous, glared at him. Allan glared back at it.

"Afraid are you?" he muttered. "Afraid that I will take some of your hellish possessions away from this devil-haunted city of the dead?"

A ghastly chanting of warning, unholy voices seemed to blur discordantly in his ears. He shook the foul dust of the low-ceilinged rocky chamber from his tattered garments and crept back into the outer sunlight with his prize.

"I'll take it!" he screeched, madness and helpless rage thinning his deep voice. "Treasure of demons and monsters. . . . I challenge them all. . . . Laugh, sneer, at me. . . . I hear you. . . . I, Allan Allan of England fear you not!"

His prize was a plain circlet of massive brassy metal, deeply scored with the imprint of a score or more interlocking triangles. He slipped it over his sun-seared arm and instantly about him a soothing aura of coolness seemed to descend. The sound of gibbering demoniac voices died.

Allan's fingers slipped over the rough surface of the broad bracelet until they came in contact with a tiny raised stud, set into the corner of one of the sunken triangles. Idly he twisted at the bit of metal.

An electric tingle of strange forces flooded his body. There came a haziness that swiftly solidified into a transparent, unyielding wall about him like the curving inner shell of some giant roc's egg. Darkness flashed on about him—and sunlight—and darkness. Light and blackness alternated in swift flashes.

Slowly the strange shell of force that surrounded him drifted upward, high above the massive, squat black walls of that sand-buried prehistoric city of the Afric wastes, and as it rose, in those momentary flashes of daylight, Allan Allan saw a withered human body slumped against the gloomy tower wall. Even as he watched the body swiftly disintegrated into a heap of scattered dry bones and withered skin. Then the sand once again swallowed the dark, evil walls of the ancient metropolis.

Stunned, his senses dulled by the endless struggle and thirst of the preceding days, Allan Allan's thoughts swept northward, to England and the green fields he was to never see again. He felt the shell lurch beneath him and go racing away, skimming close above the sand dunes, toward some unknown pagan hell of the vanished city builders.

His weary eyes closed, the toxins of exhaustion, of wornout muscles triumphant, and he slept.

Later, much later, he awoke. Full realization of his predicament flooded sudden panic through his brain cells. He sat up, his feet braced against the opposite wall of the mysterious bubble of force. He looked down.

"The Channel!" he gasped. Knuckles cracked as his fists clenched. "England and home. The armlet of the ancients . . . it did this!"

The shell was flashing toward the great chalk cliffs of England,

and with the surge of triumphant thought in his brain it increased its swift pace. He directed the shell toward some new goal, testing its response, and immediately, gracefully, it swung off in the new direction. Guided by mental control was this mysterious chariot of the vanished ancient race, builders of mysterious, low-walled desert cities!

"Here," said Allan Allan aloud, "is where I played at battle with my brothers. And here, in the lake, I came near to drowning.

"But the castle, Allan Castle, it is . . . is gone!" he choked. "A village where it stood. Strangely constructed dwellings. Even the fields are changed."

His impalpable shell of nothingness hovered a hundred feet above the village green. Uncertainly he willed it to descend. It rested at last upon the grass and then he twisted the tiny inset stud back to its original setting.

The shifting shadows of night and day slowed and stopped at last in midday. Allan Allan felt the welcome pressure of turf beneath his feet and he drew in great gasps of the pure moist air. Then he was conscious of voices; of words illy pronounced and strange.

Dark-robed men gathered about three women, two of them snaggle-toothed ancients, gray of hair and mad-eyed. One of them cringed like a whipped cur and Allan Allan could see the bluish marks of bruises upon her pasty flesh. The other cackled and shrieked gleefully at her companion's discomforture.

The third woman was young, fair of hair and skin, and pretty. The dark-robed men and the assembled roughly-garbed villagers seemed to cluster close about her, a foul sort of hunger in their gaze. Now he could see that rough cords bound her wrists firmly together, cutting deep into the flesh. His hand dropped to the haft of his cross-hilted longsword.

The tattered robe was ripped from the girl's fair body and the crowd seemed to sigh hungrily. Coarse men's hands examined her flesh and needles probed at her body. She screamed once.

Allan hesitated. A witch! Then her pain-filled gray eyes somehow found his and he read a mute, hopeless plea for aid in them. Here was no wanton of Satan's fold his heart told him.

"Hold!" he roared and his great sword flashed in the sun.

Startled villagers fell back from this grim sun-blackened giant in his strange trappings of mail and leather. He strode to the girl's side even as she slumped, unconscious, in his arms. He drew the cloak back about her soft body and faced the black-robed witch-hunters boldly.

Carrying her unconscious body he strode through their stunned ranks. Ten—eleven, steps he took before slender rapiers and pikes were raised against him. His sword hammered at their frail blades, sweeping them aside and smashing through cringing flesh and brittle bones.

Five of the black-robed men were down but now the villagers, armed with staves, axes and pitchforks, swarmed about him. His weary, heat-sapped muscles were failing him. One mighty sweep of his sword cleared a narrow ring about him and then his fingers groped for the tiny metal stud. Shimmering walls built up about him and the girl, shutting out all others.

Momentarily he glimpsed a blurring swarm of men leaping upon a mail-shirted warrior beyond the walls. And across the warrior's arm hung the body of a golden-haired maiden!

A memory of mouldering bones below him in the Afric desert came to Allan. The blending of day and night into light and blackness, in alternating flashes, was the swift passage of time, and . . . Every forward leap of his body in time left an exact duplicate of himself behind!

Or was he . . . the duplicate?

Already his other body and that of the girl must have become blackened ashes at some witch-burning. How many days must have passed he could only imagine, but now the green leaves of the trees were swiftly turning to brown, red and gold. Even as he watched, white snow blanketed the earth and the last leaves of autumn shook from the bare black arms of the trees.

He sent the time-cell gliding effortlessly upward away from the squalid stone-and-thatch huts of the village toward the depths of a great forest. There he could hide and rest, secure from any save poachers or gamekeepers.

And beneath him the snow was dwindling and dark patches of soil showed through. Brooks and rivers were swollen and trees budded. . . .

"America!" cried fair-haired Jocelyn Moore, one-time accused witch in the forgotten English village. "Here, Allan, will we be safe from persecution. The witch-hunters will not seek us here."

Allan smiled at her. She did not know that more than a century had passed since the transparent shell of force had left England far behind. The exact date he could not know, she had told him that she was first accused in 1642, but he believed that this was the year 1780.

Downward the ovoid of nothingness swooped until they hovered above the green fields of tobacco and grain in eastern Pennsylvania. Allan twisted the little button of metal backward, almost to its starting point, and the racing flood of day and night slowed. For perhaps five minutes did the daylight endure before night came again.

"See!" cried Jocelyn, "there is war here. The bodies of red-coated men lie mingled with the bodies of roughly-clad men. There must be a revolt against the King."

Allan's fingers sought the worn grip of his cross-handled sword and his eyes lighted eagerly. Perhaps here in this new savage world

would he find comrades and battle against great odds, winning freedom from the decadent civilization of Europe.

A cluster of log-walled cottages, cabins, lay close by, and there they came to a halt. Allan snapped off the stud and the shell of force dissolved.

It was morning and homespun-clad men and women were coming from their rude homes. They spoke a strangely accented English as they clustered about this strange pair dropped, it seemed, from the very heavens. Blue Swedish eyes regarded them curiously—the mail-shirted warrior and the pale, black-robed girl.

"Come and eat," invited a yellow-bearded ox of a man.

There were no questions as to their origin. The war had sent many peculiar strangers pushing westward away from the seaboard. They were taken to be such and given shelter. Jocelyn cooked the food for the yellow-bearded Swede and his motherless brood of six, and Allan helped in the fields.

And when the winter came, Allan joined the army of Washington.

The war was ended. Allan bore the scars of many wounds on his great body and two fingers were gone from his right hand. For two years had he battled the Hessian mercenaries of George, King of England, and now he was a citizen of a new nation.

Jocelyn had married blonde-bearded Gustaf while he had been at war so there was now nothing to hold him beside the seacoast. Like a disease the urge to plumb the depths of the future came upon him.

"I will watch this new world grow," he said. "Watch it spread across the wilderness and grow strong and arrogant. . . ."

Slowly he cruised above the dwindling forests and spreading fields of America. Westward, ever westward, the frontiers pushed. Several times he touched earth again to eat and sleep for a time but nowhere did he pause for long.

He saw spiderwebs of steel cross the country and strange boats with smoking chimneys in the harbors. He saw vast armies of men in blue swarming down from the north and brave men in gray push up from the south. Allan slowed his leisurely flight through time yet further until the embattled ranks of the two armies grew clear before him.

Allan sent the time shell shooting skyward. . . . Brother slaying brother. . . . Blue and gray. . . .

Into the west he drifted, over Kansas and Missouri. Here he saw renegade guerillas of both North and South plundering and killing. Rage seethed hot within his mighty-muscled frame.

Down he plunged silently into the camp of thirty blood-draggled outlaws. As he switched off the shell of force around his body he heard pitiful moans of terrified women and came upon four trembling captives, huddled beneath a single blanket beside the fire. Bruised and bloody they were from the ordeal they had endured.

For a moment a film of flaming redness blinded Allan Allan's eyes and his blood rioted savagely. The growl of a wild beast rumbled deep down in his chest as he drew his heavy sword.

Then reason triumphed. He was alone and all but unarmed. From a stack of weapons and ammunition, carelessly stacked near the fire, he selected two rifles, powder cartridges, and several bags of bullets. Holding this plunder under his arms, he clicked the tiny stud rapidly off and on.

About him a vague looming mass of shapes was growing. No demons of Afric these, but clean-limbed fighting men, each bearing two rifles and ammunition, while at their sides swung cross-barred swords.

A score of giant handsome warriors—all Allan Allans.

They needed no instruction as to what they were to do. They knew. They swung about facing the sleeping guerillas and at that moment a guard, stationed outside the camp, saw them. He fired.

Two of the Allans returned his fire and the guard jolted backward, the cry of alarm dead on his lips. But the outlaws were warned. They came boiling out of their battered tents and shelters of branches, pistols and knives in their grimy paws—only to go down beneath a withering blast of fire. The few who escaped bullets went down beneath a flashing wall of steel.

Seventeen Allan Allans faced one another there beside the fire. They looked to Allan, he of the bracelet, as their leader.

"While the weak and helpless are oppressed," he cried, "it is our duty to protect and avenge them."

Seventeen Allan swords flashed in the firelight and a cheer burst from their throats. This new crusade fired their imagination as that ancient plundering conquest had not.

"And now," said their leader, "let us rid the camp of this human carrion and sleep."

Gutted villages, burned cabins, and death-empty farmhouses dotted the Missouri countryside. Plundering, killing and raping, the bushwhackers ranged the country like cowardly ragged wolves. Union troops and the shrunken Confederate forces of General Price were powerless to combat or control their depredations.

Into this welter of blood-hungry Kansans, Missourians, Seceshs, and Feds—border ruffians and men without a loyalty—plunged the Allans. Quick justice they rendered as they rode the outlaw trails and the cowardly followers of Quantrell and his unsavory ilk trembled in their stolen boots at the name of Allan.

Always they were the same, a score of clear-eyed mighty men well-armed and superbly mounted. Half of them might fall in battle with the tattered guerillas but the next day twenty of them rode the bloody outlaw trails. Like immortal avenging gods they patrolled the rutted forest roads and brushy trails. . . .



"Quantrell's men raid Hamdon," the little bald-pated man gasped through putty-colored lips, his eyes constantly watching the road down which he had just come.

"Come with us," ordered Allan shortly, "perhaps this time we can come to grips with them."

The Allans loosened their heavy swords and examined their spotless rifles and the loaded braces of Colt revolvers at their hips. Then they swung in behind their leader and galloped at a furious pace toward the nearby village of Hamdon.

The sounds of gunfire and of agonized screams came to their ears before they could see the village street. Then they topped a low hill overlooking the town and could see lazy curls of smoke drifting upward from a half-dozen mean dwellings. Black dots lay unmoving in the village street and horsemen rode between the houses, emptying revolvers and pistols into the windows of the houses as they went.

Two bewhiskered brutes dragged a struggling woman from a house by her plump legs. Her foot broke free and she landed a frantic kick in the groin of one of her captors. He jerked out a long-bladed knife and plunged it into her body. His comrade laughed brutally and kicked her crimsoned bulk.

A Sharps spoke and the killer spun about with the bullet's impact. A split second later his companion joined him in the dust of the road, a bullet-hole drilling his breastbone. Their blood mingled soddenly with that of the dying woman.

Then the Allans smashed into the ragged ranks of the killers as they ranged the dusty street of Hamdon. Outnumbered they were four or five to one; yet the cowardly bushwhackers fell back before them, flinging aside their weapons as they tried to escape.

"Quantrell!" screeched the bald-headed little man, pointing.

Even as he spoke a bullet smashed into his face and his bloody-masked corpse slid to the dust.

Allan spurred his horse after the leader of the guerillas. Two mounted outlaws rode into his path and his cross-handled sword licked out and through their bodies in one mighty sweep. Then he was almost upon Quantrell.

A wizened, scrawny young guerilla, not over seventeen, rode beside the outlaw chief. Now he turned and lifted his revolver muzzle. His cold eyes glittered snakily for an instant as he pressed the trigger and then Allan felt a sledge smash against his skull as the gun roared.

Hours later it seemed he was conscious of light. The bloody dirt-fouled beard of a dead guerilla was beneath his throbbing, swollen skull and a dead eye glared into his own. He twisted his head and saw the bullet-riddled body of a dark-haired girl sprawled a few feet away. The crackle of a burning building sounded close by; he could feel the heat upon his back.

Then soft hands were upon his head and the voices of women

echoed in his ears. Agony lanced through his brain as they lifted him.

"It is an Allan," a gentle voice said, and his blurred vision caught a fleeting glimpse of a wan oval face above him. "I knew it when I saw that odd sword."

Dimly he remembered being carried along the dusty street and hearing the drowsy murmur of hushed voices as he was laid upon a mattress of straw. Then the coolness of water touched his throbbing skull and he opened his eyes again. The same oval face, framed now with curling chestnut hair, was close above them. He tried to speak and the girlish head shook negatively. A white finger crossed her lips in command for silence, and she smiled gently.

Thereafter for two weeks Allan Allan lay helpless with a bullet-hole in his right temple. George Thurston and his daughter, Mabel, cared for him tenderly while he raved of Allah, mysterious black cities, witches, warlocks and war. Then one day he awoke again, clear of mind, and asked for his comrades.

"Gone," said Mabel softly, "toward the western coast of the United States. The Union Army is at last taking over control of Missouri. The guerillas of Parker, Anderson, and Younger are being smashed.

"They left word for you to meet them in California. San Francisco they said. . . . It will be many weeks before you can travel though."

Allan's heart warmed toward the smiling brown-haired girl who anticipated his every need. Maybe he had reached an end to wandering. It would be so easy to love this lovely frontier girl. To rear broad-shouldered sons and sturdy daughters.

Life was simple and direct here in the Middlewest, none of the stifling petty customs and rules of the civilized East to harass a man. Great estates waited to be carved from virgin territory and the breadth of half a continent was yet to be conquered. . . .

Allan Allan found his great sword and belted his revolvers about his waist. His eyes dropped to the massive armlet of brassy metal and he smiled grimly.

Tonight he was to wed Mabel in the village church. After that there would be no bird-like excursions into the future or from continent to continent. The old hunger to ride forward into the future was come upon him. His fingers touched the little stud.

"Why not?" he asked himself. "I can go forward but a half hour and for the last time enjoy the thrill of racing like a bird above the earth-bound mortals. Then I will lay aside the armlet forever."

He stepped outside the house and adjusted the stud to its lowest rate. The transparent walls grew about him. He sent the shell of force higher and higher into the air. Clouds fell below him

and the air grew thin and cold. He rioted in the swift, silent ease of flight.

Then he remembered the sweet face of Mabel and the weather-beaten gray church where they were to be married. The shell drove earthward again, back to the squalid houses and the dusty streets of Hamdon. He switched off the mysterious force of the armlet for the last time and entered the house.

A giant rose from his seat on the bed. Allan thrust out his hand, glad to see one of his old comrades.

"Just back from the Coast?" he asked, and then realized that his guest could have hardly reached the Coast in the few weeks elapsed.

"No," the other Allan said shortly. "You know where I came from."

Allan gasped. Of course. When he took that last flight into the future another duplicate self was fashioned to replace him in time by the weird scientific magic of the armlet. And this Allan too loved Mabel.

"I'm fighting you," announced the other, "and the best man marries her."

Hours later Allan Allan ruefully examined his swollen face and decided that both eyes were blackened. A grin contracted his puffy features painfully. He was heading westward toward California and the rest of his clan.

The other Allan had won.

Nothing now held him back from further conquest of the future. He moved away from his horses, one saddled and the other two laden with packs, and he looked at the massive circlet of metal.

Then he was drifting above the horses and the sullen, broad-shouldered man squatted beside the campfire. This new Allan shook a vengeful fist at the unseen bulk of the time shell above him. . . .

So it came that the warrior from the past came at last to rest in a beautiful little valley in Western New York State. There he rented a cottage, paying for it with old American money of pre-Civil War mintage.

It was 1940, a year when another word cataclysm was engulfing the civilized world. Daily he tramped the wooded hills and at night he read articles and studied dry scientific works borrowed from the nearby library. He had an insatiable appetite for new knowledge.

That is where I met him—at the library. We lived but a mile apart and so I gave him a lift on his way home. I said something about the Revolutionary War and he corrected me. Before I knew it, he was telling me the story of his life.

At four o'clock the next morning I drove home, stuffed to the ears with stories of Palestine, the Crusades, and the Civil War. That was the first of many such excursions into the harsh and bloody past. I examined his armlet, four or five pounds of some mysterious

metallic alloy, and gripped the hilt of his weighty Crusader's sword.

There was something magnetic, dynamic, about him, not to be found in modern man. . . . And something pathetic as well. He was a man out of place in the scheme of things. He was a crusader, a fighting man in search of worthy cause. Blood and weapons of lethal purpose he could understand but the newer weapons of propaganda and pacificism meant nothing to him. . . .

And one day he was gone. I saw him go, or rather the armlet upon his arm disappear—his duplicate self of course was left behind.

The fate of a small nation, attacked by a power-mad larger nation intent on world domination, was the reason for his departure. A proud people called to him, he said; doomed though the cause might be, he must go. He crushed my palm in his huge fingers and said goodbye.

And the next day his other body, duplicate Allan Allan, was gone. The cottage was empty. I tore a note from the door that I knew was meant for me.

"Can't rust out here in America," it said. "Joining air force over the border for service abroad "

Somewhere in Europe, with the rain pelting down and the abrupt rocky slope dragging the life from men's sinews, a thousand helmeted soldiers wearily advanced upon a lone, battered tank . . . .

And from the cramped confines of the tank, in unwavering line, marched an endless column of giant men, automatic rifles in their hands, and heavy, cross-hilted swords at their sides . . .

A hundred—two hundred—on they marched, forward into battle!

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# Tongue of the Dragon

BY DALE HART

Norman\* didn't know where he was. Really, he didn't. Just now, he was sitting under a tree with the strangest leaves that he had ever seen on any tree. He was sitting there trying to think how he got there.

A search of his memory revealed little more than his name. His brain seemed clear, but it retained almost nothing of the past.

Presently he shrugged, scrambled to his feet, and walked off down a nearby path.

He had gone only a little way when he met a man.

"Hello," said Norman, noticing that the man had one eye right in the middle of his forehead.

"Hello," returned One-Eye. He pulled off a green cap, displaying no inclination to carry the conversation to greater lengths.

"What place is this?" asked Norman, after an awkward silence.

One-Eye became attentive. His one eye mirrored concern.

"Oh," he said. "You're one of those."

He made some commiserating sounds.

"One of what?" Norman inquired testily.

"The newcomers."

"Yes, I am one of those, I guess."

One-eye continued, half-musing: "Everyone who lives here came from somewhere else. They all suddenly found themselves here, and not one of them remembers his past."

Again he made sympathetic sounds.

"I suppose you don't know where you came from or how you got here?"

Norman didn't, and said so.

One-Eye thought this over. Just why this was necessary, Norman couldn't guess. He became impatient.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

One-Eye smiled.

"You must look for the Pearls. Everyone here spends his time trying to find them. You see, they're supposed to hold the secret of how to escape to—somewhere."

Norman brightened up. He was rather confused, but he did know that he would like to escape this crazy place.

"All right. I'll help you hunt."

So, shoulder to shoulder, they strode off down the path together, with the avowed intention of finding the fabled Pearls.

## II — A Place of Peace

One-Eye and Norman were talking some time later. They were sitting on a fallen tree to rest, since walking gets tiresome after a while.

"We ought to have horses," grumbled Norman, recalling a fragment from his past.

"I've never heard of horses," One-Eye confessed. "You must not have come from the same place I did."

Norman was puzzled.

"Maybe you didn't—but you speak the same language I do. I can't understand that."

One-Eye snapped his fingers suddenly.

"I almost forgot to warn you. If we meet the High Sheriff, let me do the talking. He mustn't know we're looking for the Pearls. He's the nearest thing we have to a ruler in this place, and it's treason to search for the Pearls. He says that we shouldn't want to leave here."

"Just as you say," Norman agreed. "If the High Sheriff asks me any questions, you tell him that I'm not very intelligent. Tell him that I'm a half-witted newcomer:

Norman was very ingenious. They both thought so, he and One-Eye; Norman, especially. So, the plan was adopted for possible use. On all occasions that weren't strictly private, Norman was to be a half-wit.

"Before we start looking again," One-Eye said, "let me tell you more about this place."

"Please do."

"First of all, this isn't a large place, and there aren't very many people. If you go one way, you soon come to the Swamp. It's impassable. If you go any other way, you come to the Wall. The Wall is too high to be climbed. We've given up trying to escape by ordinary means. Everyone spends his or her time looking for the Pearls and dodging the High Sheriff. As for how we live, we eat berries and the small animals we catch in traps. The weather is mild, so we live in brush shelters."

"But," interrupted Norman, "don't you have weapons to kill wild beasts? And how do you protect yourselves?"

"We don't need weapons. The animals here aren't large or fierce."

Norman persisted, "But doesn't a small man have to protect himself against a large man?"

"No one fights here," One-Eye answered simply.

### III — A Successful Ruse

"I wish you knew more about what we're looking for," Norman complained.

They were walking through the trees that seemed to be everywhere.

"And I wish there weren't so many trees," he added.

One-Eye cocked a tolerant eyebrow.

"All I know is that we're looking for the Pearls, and that they're supposed to get us out of here. As for the trees, I can tell you now that they grow down to the swamp and up to the Wall."

Norman cursed suddenly but softly. He had seen a man coming toward them through the trees.

One-Eye had noticed, too "The High Sheriff!" he whispered. "Remember the plan."

Norman resolved to be as nearly like a half-wit as possible.

"Hello," One-Eye called out, when the High Sheriff came within hailing distance.

"Hello," responded the High Sheriff, as he walked nearer. "Nice day."

He wiped his ruddy face on the sleeve of a leather jacket, and, coming to a stop before them, leaned his rather hefty weight against a tree.

"Going far?" he asked casually, too casually.

"Just to the Wall," was the answer of the spokesman. "My friend is a newcomer, and I want to show it to him."

The High Sheriff looked keenly at Norman.

Norman looked blankly at the High Sheriff.

"He's a little off," One-Eye hastened to say. "He can't think very well, but I want to show him the Wall, anyway."

The High Sheriff was satisfied, apparently.

"Guess I'll be moving along," he said jovially. "Too bad about your friend." You'd better take care of him."

"I will," One-Eye promised gravely.

The High Sheriff went off through the interminable trees. Norman and One-Eye watched him until he disappeared, then they shook hands in mock congratulations.

Cleverness had no substitute, and they had the genuine article!

### IV — The Boiling Spring

Norman and One-Eye were sitting down again. And they were talking about the Pearls, of course. Everybody talked

them here. They talked about the Pearls, and looked for the Pearls, until they were tired, and then started all over again.

"Let's have another try," Norman proposed. "Maybe we can do better this time."

"A good idea," One-Eye concurred, but he made no move to rise.

"Why not start now?" suggested Norman, the ever-eager.

But One-Eye was not to be hurried.

"Where shall we look? We've looked everywhere I can think of to look." A pause, then, "Norman where would *you* look?"

"Why—" Norman faltered. "I hadn't thought about it. I've been following you around, that's all."

Seeing One-Eye look so downcast, he continued. "I should think that the Pearls would be in water, but . . ." His voice trailed away indecisively.

One-Eye was startled. He had never thought of that. At once, he grabbed Norman's arms and they rushed into the inevitable forest.

And they did not stop until they came to a place where water boiled out of the ground.

They leaned over carefully and peered into the streaming water. The bottom could be seen easily, for the water wasn't deep. Then they began to walk down the channel made by the escaping water.

At first, they saw nothing; but, finally, in a small pool, Norman glimpsed something white.

He took two sticks and fished out an object, as the other watched curiously.

It was a flat metal plate with black characters on the white surface of one side. And this what they read: "*Go to the largest tree nearest where you found this.*"

## V — Enter the Dragon

Until they came very close, the tree looked just like the others, except that it was many times as large. They soon saw, however, that there was an opening at the base of the trunk.

Approaching with some caution, they peeked into the tree's vast interior.

Before their eyes they saw a courtyard paved with varicolored stones and illuminated by a pool of liquid that burned with a steady blue glow.

And sprawled on the courtyard stones was an efficient-looking dragon! Near his serrated tail lay a package wrapped in green cloth.

"I thought you said there were no large animals here," Norman accused.

One-Eye shrugged. "I didn't know about the dragon."



"We must get that package," Norman announced.

"Yes, but how?" was the dry question.

"If I had a sword—I" Norman wished.

"But you haven't," he was reminded, unnecessarily. "There isn't a sword anywhere this side of the swamp and the Wall."

"Sword or no sword," the impetuous Norman declared, "I'm going after that package."

He began to walk on tiptoe toward the sleeping dragon and the green-wrapped package. One-Eyed, with an anxiety not unmixed with admiration, watched his progress.

Now, he was to the package, almost. He stooped to pick it up—

"I wish," said the dragon, "that you wouldn't walk so heavily. You woke me up."

Norman was paralyzed. He paused precariously, one foot in the air.

"Huh?" he asked stupidly.

"I said," the dragon repeated, "don't walk so heavily." The creature enunciated with pernicious precision. "You woke me up."

"I'm sorry," Norman replied humbly, involuntarily apologetic.

Then the situation struck him. Here was a talking dragon!

He found his voice again, finally. "You talked!" he breathed wonderingly.

"Of course I talk," the dragon snapped. "I haven't an ordinary dragon's tongue. Mine's different."

He opened his mouth for Norman to see. It was dark in that toothed maw, and he couldn't see anything, but he pretended to be impressed.

"But," he asked after the inspection, "aren't you supposed to watch this package?"

The dragon stifled a cavernous yawn with a fanged forepaw.

"I'm here just for appearance," he explained, with indolent hateur. "For atmosphere, you know."

"In that case, may I have the package?"

The dragon's green eyes began to close. "The package? Oh, yes. Take it, and be on your way."

So saying, the dragon settled himself for another nap.

## VI — The Wall

One-Eye crowded near to see the package after they were outside the tree. He had lost his unhurried manner and was dancing with excitement.

Norman was excited, too. His fingers fumbled as he unwrapped the green cloth. Here was success in their gasp!

The cloth fell away—and then they saw. The Pearls weren't

in the package! Instead, there was more writing on another metal plate.

The characters read: "*The Pearls are on top of the Wall.*"

Norman cursed and dropped the plate. One-Eye took off his green cap and deliberately thrust his fist through the crown.

After a long moment, Norman picked up the discarded plate. He read those maddening words.

"Let's go to the Wall," he said wearily. "It won't do any good, but let's go, anyway."

Neither spoke during the journey.

When the Wall was reached, they sat down and stared unseeingly at the offending barricade. There was nothing else to do.

Finally, Norman asked the question that was in the minds of both: "I wonder if we're ever going to get out of this place?"

The Wall made no answer. It was very high.

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